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SOCIAL REALISM IN CENTRAL AMERICA: THE MODERN SHORT
STORY TRANSLATED

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Humanities

By

JAMES PATRICK GEARY
B.A., University of Dayton

2009
Wright State University

June 6, 2008

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY **James Geary** ENTITLED **Social Realism in Central America; the Modern Short Story Translated** BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF HUMANITIES.

David Lee Garrison, PhD
Thesis Director

Committee on Final Examination:

Ava Chamberlain, PhD
Director, Master of
Humanities Program

David Lee Garrison, PhD

Damaris Serrano Guerra, PhD

David A Petreman, PhD

Joseph F. Thomas, PhD
Dean, School of Graduate Studies

Abstract

Geary, James Patrick. M. Hum., Master of Humanities Program, 2008

Social Realism in Central America: The Modern Short Story Translated.

Contemporary Central America fiction writers offer realistic scenarios that often concentrate on the effects of globalization, the inevitable forces of transnational corporations, the global media, and government policy in the region. These writers show how racism and tensions between the social classes perpetuates division and alienates union between unique ethnic groups of the underprivileged majority. The dominant class in Central America, in collaboration with the United States threatens diverse cultures and causes their autonomous identities to become diluted and their very existence to become endangered. The Central American short story has a tendency to express various inequalities. It shows how privileged minorities of Central America enjoy an unequal distribution of wealth. Their children, for example, study abroad while the disenfranchised majority suffers inadequate education that fuels a kind of racism (“Hero”). It shows how the imposition of an asymmetrical exchange of culture by dominant Anglo values is integrated into Central America in an alliance between corrupt regional officials (“The Sniper”) and conservative, right-wing death squads (“The Crying Children”) and (“Paternity”). It reveals the actual cost to overthrow Manuel Noriega in 1989 (“A Scream in the Night”). The translated tales told in this project, illustrate this unequal multi-national cultural exchange. In this thesis I present to English-speaking readers these perspectives of Central America.

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Introduction

This project introduces a translated selection of realistic postmodern short stories by six Central American authors from the late twentieth century. My objective is to introduce to the English-speaking world their brand of social realism. Their experiences reveal dialectic tensions between the dominant domestic culture inscribed by their political structures that result in the isolation of ethnic tradition and the subjugation of varied voices in the struggle for social justice. Through my translations of short stories from some notable postmodern Central American writers that have emerged toward the end of the 20th century, I hope to engage English speaking readers with a new perspective of the pride, passion, torment and anguish portrayed through the vivid imaginations of these writers, and their hopes to establish an identity that to this day remains obscure in this Pandora's Box referred to as the American Isthmus.

The stories from this overlooked troupe of scholars conveys previously censured themes relating to history, social injustice, threatened indigenous cultural values, transnational aggression, feminism and other traditionally taboo themes. Their fiction includes an expression of the diverse cultural constituencies and social institutions that encompass their diverse "regional group dialects, jargons, clichés and slogans, stylistic innovations, and nonce words," that articulate their characters' situational settings and societal surroundings. Without a childhood in the Latin American culture, I have nevertheless acquired an

interest in the region and continue to immerse myself in Latin American literature. At this point, my interest in translation is directed toward the Central American short story that has only attained (up to now) minority status within its own domestic culture and literary canon. Introducing a selection of re-creations to Anglo America may also facilitate a minoritizing effect on dominant culture inscribed by the standard North American English dialect. The standard dominant dialect, in all countries, is the major form that subordinates the remainder or other regional forms of expression. The latter, however, surpasses the communicative act socially and subverts the standard form and dominant culture by frustrating the official system of rules (Venuti, 9-10).

The contemporary authors that I have ventured to represent release the remainder in conjunction with their dominant dialect to realize an aesthetically inventive text. The stories I have chosen to translate in this project tend to minoritize the foreign dominant dialect which subsequently questions the structure of their dominant culture through the voice of characters at various levels of social existence, historical and contemporary. Through a strategic selection of foreign texts that have been marginalized and subordinated under the official standard of Central American Spanish, I have intended to authentically portray the unique remainder conveyed by dissenting voices of the contemporary Central American author to my own domestic readership permitting the participant reader to take into account the standard American English dialect and question its own dominant culture. In Lawrence Venuti's, *The Scandals of Translation*, he asserts that,

“Foreign texts can be chosen to redress patterns of unequal cultural exchange and to restore foreign literatures excluded by the standard dialect, by literary canons, or by ethnic stereotypes in the United States or in the other major English-speaking country, (the United Kingdom). At the same time, translation discourses can be developed to exploit the multiplicity and polychrony of American English. (10)

In conjunction with the standard dialects of North American English and Central American Spanish, I optimistically anticipate that the following re-creations incite recognition that cultural gaps may be connected by different social groups divided and separated by their dominant national culture. In the same way, the ethnological language gap and resulting cultural differences between the North and South American continents may be perceived with less estrangement.

Theories of Translation

The translations of the stories in the following pages are, in fact, re-creations; texts that appear to be the same as the original, but can never be exactly the same. While translating the following stories into English I have laid the background work for my re-creations by reading and analyzing the techniques and philosophies of some of the most prominent translators of modern and post-modern Latin American literature. Keeping in mind the approaches of these accomplished veteran translators, I have been fortunate to approach my selections with a combination of insightful models.

The award-winning translator Margaret Sayers Peden has worked closely—and continues to do so—with numerous illustrious Latin American

writers, including Carlos Fuentes, Isabel Allende, Octavio Paz and has even translated some of the late Horacio Quiroga's great work. The captivating manner in which Sayers Peden describes how she unwittingly became motivated to become a translator is particularly enchanting. While she was doing research for her doctoral thesis about the Mexican dramatist Emilio Carballido, she had to read one of his short novels entitled "*El Norte*." I said to my husband, "What a shame that you can't read this book because it's perfect." And he said, "Why don't you translate it?" And I thought, "Why not?" And so I entered the world of translation while I was a professor of literature at the University of Missouri. (Del Mar Grandío, María. 2001)

To Sayers Peden, the act of translating is a constant learning process that can't be carried out with only a dictionary; she argues that the dictionary can often completely distort the meaning of words within the context of the original creation. She expresses the need to call on her creativity and to invent because an exact translation is unattainable. With conviction Sayers Peden declares that "[t]here are writers who write poetry, others who write novels; I write translations." (Del Mar Grandío)

Like many dedicated students and scholars of Spanish, I sometimes have difficulty describing my fascination with the Spanish language and Latin America. On the contrary, Sayers Peden is quite articulate when she describes "the flexibility of the language" and the "different shades of meaning" which she feels are "synonymous with exotic places". Most importantly, as she recalls from her first translation for her husband, the most delightful aspect of translation is

bridging the gap between cultures. Evident from her long list of works and awards, she maintains that “with every book I translate, I grow closer to the Hispanic culture.” (Del Mar Grandío)

Identifying and understanding diverse regional expressions is paramount in the realization of an effective translation. In the article “Telling Others’ Tales”, Sayers Peden contends that the most important aspect of the translation process is voice. By voice, she means how something is conveyed: “the way the tale is told; the way the poem is sung”. (Peden 9) Only when one can determine who is narrating, who is describing, who is explaining can one begin to embark on a faithful translation. This is where that bridge of literary creativity can begin to emerge. “Whose voice is creating the Spanish sounds that in my mind’s ear begin to change into English? And may we not, peripherally, have a mind’s ear to correspond to the mind’s eye?” (Peden 9)

As a student of translation I find the metaphorical description of Sayers Peden exceptionally illuminating concerning the metamorphosis of a re-creation from the original text: picturing the original text as an ice cube, it must be melted- -this happens somewhere in the brain. In its liquid form it is no longer an ice cube, all the molecules are in a volatile state of instability. In this changed form, the translator begins a sifting process of selecting and eliminating, assessing and filtering. The melted state of the author’s voice becomes fragmented as the Spanish shifts into English. However, in the re-creation phase that voice becomes domineering in the choice of tone, lexicon and syntax. Eventually another ice cube takes shape that looks like the original, but nothing about it is precisely

identical. But with luck, it seems to be the same. “The apparently identical ice cube is the ideal translation.” (Peden 9) From Spanish to English, this is how Margaret Sayers Peden tells others’ tales.

The anonymous emergence of Gregory Rabassa during the late twentieth century to the profession of Latin American literature translation has certainly had an impact on the enrichment to the pedagogy of foreign language instruction and translation. With his contribution to a domestic English readership of surrealist Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela*, (*Hopscotch*) and *Cien Años de Soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) by Gabriel García Márquez, appreciation for Latin American literature and study has become manifest. In his book, *If This Be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents*, Rabassa maintains that “[The] thesis in the book is that translation is impossible” and “that people expect reproduction, but you can’t turn a baby chick into a duckling. The best you can do is get close to it.” (Bast 1) Still, many critics have said that he gets as close as anyone can and that he is one of the best practitioners of his profession. He has disclosed that his technique and certainly part of his philosophy to render the voice of diverse ethnologies and class structure from the Latin American stage to be a particularly puzzling challenge. To be able to know the writer as well as his characters enables the translator to be better equipped to begin to detect “the music in English that is true to the language of a wide range of writers in Spanish.” (Bast 1)

Translation is a cognitive exercise. There may not be a textbook, tutorial, or step by step manual to instruct the apprentice translator; however, most of the accomplished translators of the twentieth century do have a philosophical

approach to their art. I have found that my approach to translation provides more complete comprehension of the literature I read in Spanish, often times, more than the literature read in my native English. The apprentice translator becomes more proficient not only in the language of the original creation, but also in his own native language. I have become much more aware of certain words in texts that I would tend to overlook in English, figuring that I understood the general idea. A faithfully translated paragraph or sentence can only be rendered by knowing the word and weighing the nuances of more accurate synonyms.

Jorge Luis Borges always subscribed to an evolutionary approach to translation. He evaluated the art of translation with the belief that a translation may improve upon the original, or be unfaithful to it. Most literary critics of translation would agree that Borges has had a profound effect on the post modernist's advance in translation. He saw translation as a procedure for reading as well as for writing, and he speculated that the critics of translations and translators of the ancient classics should be ever conscious of the reception theory; that is, "in privileging the relation between the reader's context and the text over the now desacralized concepts of authorship and originality." (Borges and Levine 1134) In essence translations of original texts should evolve as language has historically evolved. For that reason, Borges believed that the translations of *The 1001 Arabian Nights* became much more important when the original was translated into English, German and French. Furthermore, of the many versions of Homer's classical epics, *The Illiad* and the *Odyssey*, Borges, the reader/translator preferred to translate Alexander Pope's version of Homer

because the English poet's unembellished descriptive manner “dramatizes the ornate grandiosity of Góngora.” (Borges and Levine 1134) To Borges, the more modern Baroque style of Pope’s early 18th century version “revived for him in the Spanish language the primary grandeur of the epic poem....” (1134).

Greatly influenced by Borges, Suzanne Jill Levine describes in her book *The Subversive Scribe* that Borges recognized the need always to consider the evolution of other languages and traditions in order to accomplish a faithful translation. (21) Borges, like the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, always thought their English translators could improve their works; according to García Márquez, the English version of *Cien años de Soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) was better in the Rabassa translation than his original version.

Although there are some exceptions, most translators contend that one needs to know and analyze the original text written in a foreign language; it must be absorbed and grasped methodically before one can expect to create a good, faithful translation. Atypically, Rabassa translates while he’s reading the original text; he’s reading in Spanish, but thinking mostly in the English that he rewrites. However, unlike his usual technique that he uses to translate most of his work, he approached *One Hundred Years of Solitude* after already reading the novel. Praising the most famous work of García Márquez, he maintains that it wasn’t as much fun already knowing all about it. (Bast 2)

In the thought provoking words of Jorge Luis Borges, he contends that “the translator’s craft is more subtle, more civilized than the writer’s: the translator obviously comes after the writer. Translation is a more advanced stage.”

(Levine 1) The translator is judged by the re-creation of a visible text. The writer escapes the skeptical analysis of the critics because his referent is not regimented, it is concealed; his creative license authorizes him to be inaccurate and his original text to be imprecise with regard to his original intention. Therefore, according to Borges the notion of a "definitive text belongs to religion or perhaps merely to exhaustion." (Borges and Levine 1137)

The late Emir Rodríguez Monegal, another esteemed translator of the twentieth century, was a professor of Comparative Literature and Romance Languages at Yale. With his contributions he will always be remembered as one of the precursors for the recognition of Latin American literature worldwide. Evidently, Rodríguez Monegal would generally subscribe to Borge's theory of translation as he once said,

To write about translation is to write about one of writing's most conscious operations, the one that lays open the function of writing as a manipulation of words and not of realities. (Levine xii)

In agreement with Borges' comparison of the different versions of Homer, he would also argue that the more faithful translation (of classical literature) should transcend the strict literal rendering of the time of a translated adaptation. Because the eloquent form of Baroque expression still survived in England in the early 1700's, Rodríguez Monegal seems to concur with Borges when he found that the translation of Alexander Pope's Homeric versions had that same articulate descriptiveness. (Borges and Levine 1134)

By maintaining the spirit or real message of the original and only manipulating words, Rodríguez Monegal once again agreed to Borges's approach of his Spanish version William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*. While Borges generally praised the work of Faulkner, Rodríguez Monegal insists that the earlier original English versions were "menos atrayentes que incómodas, menos justificables que exasperantes (less attractive than uncomfortable, less justifiable than exasperating" (Haaga 1). According to Rodríguez Monegal, by reducing the difficulty of Faulkner's long winded sentences that even the native readership has found monotonously complicated, Borges's Spanish translation actually improved Faulkner's original. Rodríguez Monegal applauded Borges's rendering as "quizás más apretado que el de Faulkner" ("perhaps tighter than that of Faulkner" (Haaga 1) After all, Borges would argue, how can anyone ever know what the intentions of the author of the original creation were; especially the authors of ancient classic texts thousands of years old that had been translated several times? Even a reader or translator in Homer's age could only come close to what the author really wanted to convey (Borges and Levine 1134).

My goal in this project, however, has been to concentrate on communicating through my re-creations the modern day tone and voice in a sometimes colloquial English; language fashioned as accurately as possible to the cultural identities and attitudes of modern day Central America and its inhabitants with the intention to also introduce to the English readership, the experiences of Central American people as revealed by these writers through the voices of their fictional characters.

As an apprentice of Spanish translation who lived in Costa Rica for fourteen years, I was immediately able to relate to the comments of Alastair Reid, famous for his translations of the South American writers, Jorge Luis Borges and Pablo Neruda. Reid has a philosophy comparing the writer of an original text to the translator because all language is an interpretation of fundamental experiences. Although the writer of the original must have the initial inspiration, the translator must also delve into the mystifying course of self discovery through language. He also contends that the more you learn a foreign language, the more one's own native language improves. Still, the newly learned language has to be learned beyond the basic level of proficiency. And as a foreigner living in another language one inadvertently (as in my own personal experience) creates a new self. Similarly, during the act of translation, the most stimulating moment, Reid says, is when you reach that indeterminate state "alienated from your own but not quite arrived at the adopted land" (Ramnarayan, 3).

Another great translator, Renato Poggioli, a distinguished scholar in Comparative Literature, Slavic and Italian Studies, was a Professor at Smith College, Brown University, and Harvard University between 1938 and 1963. Born in 1907, his untimely death due to an auto accident in 1963 abruptly put to an end the life of an authentic visionary of the post vanguards and further evolution of his lucid postmodernist approach to translation. Poggioli expressly compares translation to many other forms of art, namely, music and acting. The musician, like the translator, begins his craft only after being introduced to the creation of another artist. The play actor and poet readers' goal is to eloquently

verbalize something that remains mute on the written page. Conversely, in his subtle manner, the accomplished translator cloaks this verbiage into a fresh, innovative structure. More specifically, he cultivates a literary parlance alien to the written creation of which he translates (Poggioli, 137,138). "... Poggioli reminds us that one of the aims of a good translator is to sacrifice himself so completely to the work that his personality completely disappears." (Brower, 6)

Undeniably, translation has been an interpretative endeavor throughout history, introducing to a different culture "a beauty or truth which would be lost without [such a capacity]" (Poggioli, 139). The modern translator is not impartial, but like most modern artists he does strive for self-expression while remaining subjective; his self-expression can not be completely unharnessed to emphasize that something is true. The accomplished modern translator does not imitate, but is rather motivated by a deliberate receptiveness or attraction which can subsequently be described as an empathetic rendering, although from a culturally foreign identity with which somehow he or she can identify ideally, faithfully, and realistically (Poggioli, 141). The late Poggioli's perception of the genuine postmodern translator can be best described from of his own eloquent words.

Even when he seems attracted only by the novel and the strange,
by the foreign and the exotic, by the innovations or
experimentations of an alien advance-guard of which he wants to
become the representative..., the translator is always a humanist, a
worshiper of tradition, a believer in the eternal values of arts and
letters (Poggioli, 146).

Poggioli suggests that the translator doesn't have to be a repressed or self-conscious person, but he needs to be a repressed artist through the complete conception of a foreign writer, and through the spirit of this alien identity one is enabled to release his emotional inhibitions thus acquiring the desired affect of a more eloquent articulation of one's own self-expression (Poggioli, 142). "[The translator] is a character who, in finding an author without, finds also the author in himself." (Poggioli, 142) Poggioli had always felt that good translators are an indispensable element in the field of literature; and sometimes, even more important. He recognized that they have always been the most international or multi-ethnic residents of the borderless "Republic of Letters," without which many culturally diverse literary traditions can (and have been) isolated within the walls created by the same ethnic diversity. A national literature, particularly in modern times will too often only survive with the efforts of the accomplished translator (Poggioli 147).

The art of translation, however, is an anonymous profession; and the motivation to translate is not usually out of notoriety. Whether it is out of an altruistic motivation or for mere financial gain translators translate because they are willing and able. Contemplating the forethoughts of pioneers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Gregory Rabassa, Alastair Reid, Renato Poggioli and the more contemporary methods of Margaret Sayers Peden and Suzanne Jill Levine, the apprentice translator will be better equipped to assimilate an alien entity into a native depiction appreciated by his domestic audience. My ultimate objective is to

contribute to the bridging of the cultural gap that persists between the Anglo and Latin Americas.

Central American Social Realism

During the last forty years Central American fiction has begun to evolve with a focus on dialectical expression that has emerged in the work of this new generation of Central American intellectuals. These writers have been subjected to and surrounded by invasive occupations over the last fifty years. With innovative techniques, Central American writers of fiction often recall and compare the unbridled cycle of exploitation and expropriation consequential of foreign intervention and civil war with an embittered posture that cynically describes immoral injustices in the region.

The Postmodern Central American short story is a uniquely new form of political expression that frequently explores the aftermath of civil war in Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador during the 1970's and 1980's. Unfortunately this expression has been obstructed due to the unequal trade balance between English and Spanish translation. These hot spots of social discontent served to usher in a new politicized form of literary thought that is still disregarded and censured ingeniously by publishers receptive to global capital and the lucrative interests of dominant culture in Anglo America and Great Britain; quite simply, a lot of money is made from translating English, but little is invested in translating into it. However, hope remains that translators receptive to the first

hand experiences expressed through Latin American fiction will continue to diffuse the asymmetrical exchange of cultural values ever-present in the publishing houses controlled by global economics. After all, these writers, without a doubt, offer a more complete documentation of modern history in the region. The subtle and sometimes blunt accusations of these innovative writers suggest an alternative perspective for the causes and effects of historical events and challenge many pre-conceived prejudices about Central America. The tales translated in this project are products from an original text written in another language with a perspective of the world largely unfamiliar to the North American English reader. Central American postmodern literature can often be interpreted as a denunciation of our own predominant prejudices to historical events in the region. At the same time, these writers often dispute the inclinations of their governments' domestic and foreign policies; they shed light on the proclivities of their dominant domestic cultures that allude to the true intention of their countries' corrupt leaders motivated by multinational special interests. Furthermore, the stories presented here imply that international commercialization translated into Spanish by the global media and disseminated over Central America is dictated by Anglo culture and the English language. The proliferation of Anglo values cleverly confounds the marginalized voices that make up all of the sub-cultures of the Central American discontented majority. The dominant cultural values of the global capitalist economy instigate rivalries and animosities between different constituencies subordinate to the elite dominance of regional government. The perpetuation of ethnocentric prejudice between these diverse

social groups is a particularly effective means by which multinational intention remains viable in spite of its misleading portrayal. The themes that dominate this sub-genre of contemporary Latin American Literature convincingly represent the contemporary forms of aggression, prejudice, population displacement, and social injustice caused by forces of the global capitalist economy in the developing countries of Central America. After analyzing the works of several present day Central American authors, I chose to translate and compile five selections from an anthology of short stories entitled *Cicatrices (Scars)* compiled by Werner Mackenbach. I also decided to include some short stories from Rogelio Guerra Ávila's own collection of short stories in his publication, *El suicidio de las Rosas (The End of the Roses)*. In the story, "Héroe" (Hero), Ávila illustrates the relentless racial tensions that permeate society in Panama City. Through his prose, Guerra Ávila suggests that by opening one's heart to different social groups within the same dominant culture a coalition establishes itself that can more aptly challenge fixed social values established by its dominant national culture. Many postmodern writers reflect on the intentions of their dominant culture and the infringement of globalization and its control of the modern media which is requisite to veil the avaricious aggression that protects preserves and perpetuates a perplexing cycle that detaches humanity from its fundamental relation to nature. This new expression of fiction is a revolutionized type of modern Latin American thought. These authors impart an evolved prose fiction that features elements of exploratory contemplation through the eyes of characters and narrators of the twentieth century that have survived the corruption and subsequent turmoil in a

region historically burdened with intervention, foreign and domestic exploitation, and the futile struggle for social justice. These intriguing characters and narrators consist of protagonists from the underprivileged majority, feminists, and scoundrels from the advantaged autocratic minority whose deceptive oligarchic “democracies” continue to maintain their foothold on the valuable natural resources of the region. The distinct personalities that form the dialectic of this prose are set between the southern border of Mexico to the streets of Panama City; an array of diverse ethnic and social groups that extend from the remnants of the war torn mountains of El Salvador and Guatemala to the disadvantaged neighborhoods of the Central American capital cities; from the corrupt bureaucratic government ministries and luxurious palatial residences to the pristine beaches and impoverished port towns of the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

The Central American feminist voice has also become more pronounced over the last fifty years, a budding manifestation that had been, as a rule, suppressed by old-fashioned convention. The Costa Rican author Ana Cristina Rossi, for example, eloquently communicates the injustices against women within the dominant Latin American patriarchal tradition of *machismo* in her story “Una historia corriente” (“A Typical Story”). Here, a nationally famous female successfully pursues her profession as a news correspondent while interviewing powerful dictators and revolutionary leaders in the region. Struggling with her own infidelity she confronts the double standard that threatens her career. Homosexuality, another theme historically avoided by Latin American literary

expression has recently emerged as well. In “Una puta para tres” (“One Hooker for Three”), Salvador Conjura expertly describes the horrors of a gay adolescent and the efforts of his father and peers to initiate him into macho manhood.

Many Central American writers reflect and record some of their own reality through a picaresque-type prose, not only from historical and political perspectives, but also by integrating magical, mythical and psychological elements with a philosophically humanist perception often from the point of view of a displaced person or people, but also sometimes satirically from the perception of the oppressive privileged minority (José Ángel Vargas 17-18)¹. The Honduran Eduardo Callejas satirically typifies a corrupt customs official, protected by his dominant domestic culture while abusing his privileged position with despicable practices in “El Francotirador” (“The Sniper”). A harsh, desperate existence has begun to be expressed by the recent trend of postmodern Central American writers of fiction. Often their first hand experiences emerge in their stories due to the tumultuous regions in which they grew up. Whereas local and regional newspapers and television broadcasts relate persuasive picture of politics, social problems and economic issues, the contemporary writer of Central American fiction consciously includes relevant depictions that are, perhaps, inconvenient for the public to ponder in regard to their perception of their government’s dominant cultural values. In Carlos Paniagua’s “El llanto de los niños” (“The Cry of Children”), the protagonist is evidently a government death squad agent adapting to Guatemalan society while contemplating the incomplete reports of the news

¹ All quotes and paraphrases from the texts written in Spanish are my own translations and interpretations respectively.

media's crime reports and the subsequent inaccurate interpretation of the public. The story by the Salvadoran Horacio Castellanos Moya entitled "Paternidad" ("Paternity") also expresses the permanent affect on the mind of a government death squad member and his difficulty reintegrating himself into a non-violent lifestyle.

Present day Central American fiction has been greatly affected by global trends such as, invasion; economic domination from the United States and other countries; and the recent civil wars of El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. The destruction of their countries through civil war, local oligarch-style governments and international insurrection in order to dominate the region is commonly expressed by the authors with disenchantment and frustration by their characters. Contemporary Central American authors critique the influence of the global capitalist economy with its political and ideological effects on minor culture. In Panama, Rogelio Guerra Ávila illustrates in his short story, "El Suicidio de las Rosas" ("The End of the Roses"), from his publication of the same title, the futile existence of a marginalized sector of the masses due to the effects of modernization and globalization. Because the three old ladies assert that they wouldn't trade their house with the rose garden for "todo el petróleo de Alaska" ("all the oil in Alaska") they end up losing everything. In one of his other short stories, "La noche del grito" ("A Shout in the Night"), Guerra Ávila expresses the bleak reality of a despondent man that has hit the bottom and the hopelessness endured in the miserable conditions of the slums of Panama City. In all these stories, the authors express the common theme of dominant culture in their

domestic situation influenced by global politics which inevitably imposes the mass of minor cultures toward a displaced existence.

The contemporary Central American short story is generally characterized by genuine expressions of discontent due to the socioeconomic, political and historical legacies that have resulted in the interaction and confrontation of distinct ethnic and cultural groups found in the region. As a result of an inaccurate and incomplete documentation of Central American history, modern writers of Central American fiction challenge the eminence of the prevailing establishment, but their voices are just beginning to be heard. They present a new type of prose that creatively uses ridicule and parody to realistically question issues such as; naïve national values, the pervasive effect of the mass media, political pomp, and military might, elusive education and the lack of other social programs.

Many contemporary Central American writers show how the landed elite reduce certain sectors of the marginalized majority to objects of production. One of the most valuable natural resources exploited in Central America is labor. Throughout the 1970's and 1980's, revolutionary movements provoked by coerced labor practices and the expropriation of native lands have been plagued by divisions of the heterogeneous make up of such vastly different social groups; such as, poor rural farmers, militant and pacifistic socialist groups and a weak academic middle class sector. The standard dominant culture maintained by regional government, cleverly, muddles social realism setting different groups against each other through class and ethnocentric prejudice. Not until the 1990's did we start to see a degree of diplomacy emerge; although it continues to be

unstable due to opposing ideologies among dissidents and the inability to coalesce (Vargas 17). The translated stories presented in this project are not only meant to entertain, they are also reflections rendered to inspire amity between cultures separated by their dominant national language. “[Central American] literature reaffirms, in spite of everything, the spiritual brotherhood of the towns all over the world, a brotherhood fortified precisely due to the indifferences of government” (Serrano, *Literatura* 55). The intended nature of humanity can best be revived through change directed toward a dialectical discourse with a new type of plural political territory. Jerry Harris, the secretary of the Global Studies Association of North America, lays emphasis on the need for representative bodies that are socially inclusive. Unlike the old industrial unions or the always temporary appeal of a united front of political parties, the only approach to establish viable counter-hegemonic positions to protect valuable natural resources locally and regionally is with a strong coalition of “social movements and popular sectors organized through grassroots and participatory methods” (Harris,12). In Bolivia, the Coordinadora is an alliance that has been effective in wresting foreign national control over the regions water rights, natural gas reserves and even the coca leaf grower’s rights to cultivate their product for traditional purposes; these resources are now controlled by a truly autonomist democratic space free from government influence. Oscar Olivera, one of the key organizers of this amalgamation of local assemblies explains that:

The formation of the Coordinadora responded to the political vacuum uniting peasants, environmental groups, teachers, and blue

and white collar workers in the manufacturing sector. . . there could be no individual salvation. Social well-being would be achieved for everyone, or no one at all (qtd. in Harris, 12).

With a wider distribution, the Central American short story can be instrumental expressing the need to establish counter-hegemonic positions to reveal and transcend the physical boundaries instituted to establish difference. The translation and distribution of more Latin American fiction to an English readership will eventually broaden this new type of thought toward economic democracy constituting solidarity of diverse and plural social groups locally and internationally. Grass roots organizations will be the vehicle by which the Central American will make an effective counter-hegemonic response to the changing character of social relations threatened by neo-liberal tendencies in the capitalist global economy. The translation and presentation of their modern literature will be a conduit by which the Anglo American will be convinced.

Throughout the ages, translation has had a profound impact on the course of humanity. The tendency to alter or adjust history through translation has been the impulse of the victorious to justify a one-sided, narcissistic conception of civilization. Translation has been an essential component in communication throughout Latin America even before the arrival of the first Spaniard. Even before the advent of the Spanish conquest there survived hundreds of dialects which made requisite the need for polyglot speakers to pass on commerce, culture, and politics; and to narrate chronicles of history between diverse tribes and civilizations. Eventually this complex system of communication would be

stamped out by Spanish colonization. The Spanish language would become the all-encompassing mode of verbal interaction throughout most of Latin America after the arrival of the conquistador.

Characteristically anonymous, the translator/interpreter is usually not recognized as the vital element that has historically facilitated triumph in the conquest of new lands. For the Spanish invaders the conquest of the New World was made possible not only with horses, cannon and musket, but also with the significant sway of verbal translation. According to the chronicles of Bernal Diaz del Castillo in his *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (*The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*), the Aztec empire could never have been subjugated without the efforts of his loyal interpreters. Hernán Cortés could only learn about Aztec legend and tradition through the translations of his multi-lingual concubine, more commonly known as La Malinche. She was often described as a traitor comparable to Pocahontas, or Sacagawea. As an accomplished translator/ interpreter from the New World, she was able to convey the indigenous beliefs and realities of the pre-Columbian civilization to the Europeans; more important, she was able to falsely confirm the fears to the Aztec emperors that Cortés was in fact Quetzalcóatl, the bearded god that was believed to come forward and preside over the Aztec empire. Their legends were their beliefs and their tradition was their reality. Historically, literature and cultural exchange has been an asymmetrical proposition. The dominant culture of the aggressor only subscribes to appealing tradition and convenient beliefs of the subordinate culture's literature. Through avarice the translator has historically

been one-sided, faithful to the aspirations of the dominant invader. Subsequently, the historical inaccuracy of perception through deceitful translation practices becomes obvious. In sixteenth century New Spain, the Franciscan Friar Diego de Landa, effectively destroyed Mayan history, culture, and literature by burning their sacred archives and establishing the Roman Catholic Inquisition. Before becoming the Bishop of the Yucatan, in his book, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, Landa justifies the purging of Mayan history and heritage (Clendinnen 108-126).

Predictably, the Spanish Conquistadors did subscribe to some of the more enticing legends; such as the golden city of El Dorado in South America. Other accounts indicate that Juan Ponce de León heard of the fountain from the Arawaks of Puerto Rico when he conquered the island; he launched an expedition to locate it, and in the process discovered Florida. Though he was one of the first Europeans to set foot on the North American mainland, he never found the Fountain of Youth. Some years later, Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca reported in 1531 of the seven golden cities of Cíbola to the north which prompted expeditions to the southern part of what is now the United States, by Hernando de Soto and Francisco Vázquez de Coronado.

Fortunately, in order for the Spanish to administer the conquered lands of the new worlds, colonial efforts to maintain dominance could only survive through the hybridizing catalysts of miscegenation and syncretism. The creation of the mestizo race, the catholic religion blended with indigenous beliefs and the Spanish language with regional dialects. In *Prospero's Mirror*, Ilan Stavans

demonstrates through translation that the roots of Central American literature are traced back to pre-Columbian civilizations thousands of years before the European first set foot in the New World.

Their poems, an expression of their vision of time, their dreams and frustrations, have changed countless times in front of our very eyes; they are what we want them to be; and what one commentator believed they were is light-years away from the views of others. In spite of many generous scientific discoveries, dating back to the early nineteenth century, about Macchu Picchu, Tenochitlán, and other ruined population centers, the pre-Columbians are nothing but our own image reflected in a distorted mirror: the observer observing himself in others. From the moment it clashed with European culture to [present day] Nahuatl civilization was betrayed and misrepresented, then renewed and reinvented by innumerable interpreters. (viii)

Still, through more than five hundred years of hybridization, there remains some vestige of the unique cultural identity implicit to the land and people that continue to exist, although still only recognized through the efforts of the works exclusive to the contemporary writer of the Central American short story.

In the 1960's, as the hippie movement began to emerge in the United States to voice discontent toward intervention in Vietnam and protesting unconditional allegiance toward the powers that be, a prominent literary movement also began to emerge from Latin America. Important prizes went to Latin American writers: the Fomenter Prize of 1961 to the Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges. . .and the Nobel Prize for Literature (1967) to the Guatemalan Miguel

Ángel Asturias, who had also received the Lenin Peace Prize in 1966. Novelists of astonishing range and technical virtuosity were quickly recognized in Europe and the United States. Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Gabriel García Márquez in particular seemed to be at the real center of the dominant literary tradition that included Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Mann, Gide, and Faulkner: the era of the “boom.” (Chambers and Levi, xiii)

Central American authors have always known what they were writing about, but only recently have they begun to know who they are writing for. Until now, very few Central American authors have achieved international recognition for their prose. Miguel Ángel Asturias (Guatemala) and Rubén Darío (Nicaragua) were the main precursors to attain notoriety, but the Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal, Minister of Culture for the Sandinistas has been the most recent writer of prose to be nominated for the Nobel Prize. Undeniably, the struggle for the mainstream population of the region to come to terms and assert their distinct identities is gaining more recognition among critics and translators to contribute to and participate in the enrichment of indigenous languages and literatures. Rather than submitting to the wholesale globalization of culture through language hegemonies, advertising techniques and other instruments of homogenization; awareness of the effects of globalization and the questionable domination of English should become more vigorously articulated by the writers of the Central American short story and their faithful translators. This medium is particularly suited to convey their messages to foreign cultures that perhaps conjure up parallels relevant within their own domestic circumstance.

The Central American short story is an original form of expression that illustrates a distinct perspective of love, passion and politics. I have endeavored to reveal, through English recreations for my domestic audience, a critique of dominant multi-national influence and the effects on minor cultures and society in Central America. This type of critique, often described rationally only through fiction by the earnest reflections portrayed by modern writers of the region is shadowed by media monopoly. The Central American short story is a representation of society distinct from the conception generally presented through the politik of the globalized media. Central American literature, more specifically the short story, is a portrayal of society motivated by the intellectual deliberations of the region's scholars. Their reflections are commonly presented in contrast to the dominant depiction presented by the forces of the global economy in collusion with the intentions of exclusionary lobbyists and influential special interest groups. Unequal multi-national trade agreements are particularly lucrative for the advantaged representatives and associates of the regional governments of Central America.

On the other hand, the translation of foreign texts has been instrumental in the promotion of anticolonial movements and resistance toward hegemonic encroachment. "Between 1955 and 1980 the most frequently translated author in the world was Lenin, according to UNESCO statistics" (Venuti, 158). The translation of the contemporary short story from Central America is a particularly important means by which social dissent can be expressed to address their

subordinate position maintained at the behest of dominant empire and its complicity with globalized capital.

While modern Central American fiction identifies social inadequacies and certain absurdities concerning the logic of “democratic” globalization brokered by regional government, Central American fiction and translation remains isolated within local boundaries conveniently obscured by the priorities of global capital. Translation, literature and cultural exchange have always been asymmetrical in its practice and distribution, which can be attributed to the barrage of stereotypes inflicted by the global media. Dominant empire advantageously imposes and creates its preferred cultural identity to the subordinate, developing countries out of a manipulation of translation in conjunction with the global media. Inside the hegemonic nation translation frames altered images of subordinate countries to condition the former’s citizens to a narcissistic mindset in order to influence a continued embodiment of their dominant domestic values; thus, fortifying ethnic stereotypes, foreign policies, and even trade patterns. Because of the asymmetrical distribution of cultural values between Anglo America and Spanish-speaking America, translation has necessarily tended to be one-sided rejecting subordinate socio-historic cultures of developing countries while assimilating the objectives of the dominant conquering culture.

Considering the progress of modern day history with regard to the global capitalist economy, the establishment of autonomous civil societies in Latin America along with a more equitable exchange of published translations from Spanish to English should foster a borderless brotherhood.

The following stories that I have chosen to include in this project should be distributed outside their regions, but there are very few publishing houses in Central America and they have limited resources and postal services in the region, so it has been hard for them to promote their books. Also, few translators have taken on the challenge of communicating this new form of literary expression to an English readership. Consequently, Central America has remained a region with an ignored culture in search of an identity. Its music, art and literature have remained largely unknown within the English speaking world. As Roy Boland and Ricardo Roque Baldovinos point out in their introduction of *From War to Peace: Perspectives on Modern Central American Literature*:

Central America has continued to remain a terra incognita for the rest of the world. It is not uncommon for an average citizen of the U.S., or for that matter of Canada, Australia or New Zealand, to associate “Central America” with a state in the middle of the U.S. - perhaps Kansas, Nebraska or Colorado. Even in Spain - *la madre patria* (the mother country) - the average citizen has little idea of where El Salvador or Honduras is situated. (Boland and Boldovinos 1)

This project was designed not only for the benefit of academia, but also an atypical reading for the Anglo American public in general because of the authenticity of these depictions of Central American existence from the imaginations of present day writers from the region. Through the messages contained in these translated short stories derived from a genuine foundation, a

representation less asymmetric of the effects of global capitalism can be recognized; perhaps a disclosure from which, to some degree, we all may relate. To the perceptive reader, these stories amplify the obligation to consider a political dialectic that calls for an improved approach toward economic democracy. The participant reader will draw parallels from these stories as many North Americans are beginning to question the moral authority of our own domestic culture and the conception of the “American Dream”.

The political, cultural and socio-economic problems in the United States are different compared to those of the countries of Central America, but ironically there are many similarities. Through Central American literature, a better understanding of these differences and similarities can be compared to our own problems attributed to dominant culture. By listening to the voices and narrations of these writers from their matter-of-fact perspective as to what has transpired in Central America for the last 50 to 60 years, a rational evaluation as to what has been happening in our own country and all over the world can perhaps be interpreted simultaneously.

The End of the Roses

A Translation of Rogelio Guerra Avila's
"El Suicidio de Las Rosas"

Panama

In the house of Roses the flowers in the garden smell like heaven, the invisible wind swirls in the corners without making any noise and migratory birds stop to chirp between the leaves of their favorite large branch. It's a handsome, old-fashioned home of rubble stone masonry, with large high windows of beveled glass protected by fashionable iron bars, a four-sided roof with tiles in the colonial style and an alluring entrance with flowerpots of bougainvillea and pansies that shake, somnolently foreshadowing waking mysteries. Its marvelous wide patios and most secretive paths are flooded with roses, cultivated with care by skilled hands that have created the most impressive rose garden that human eyes have ever seen. There are several varieties: wild red roses, small white roses with a fragrance of musk; climbing vine varieties that produce many blooms, the hundred leaf variety with long stems and peach colored blossoms, The Castilian and other exotic varieties from China and Bengal, from San Juan and Borbón, from the Alps and Damascus, and other lesser known varieties of extraordinary beauty. Roses brought from all over the world that over the years have adapted to the caprice of the tropics, to the inclement heat and incessant rains.

The house of Roses is like a preserved spring oasis protected between the tall buildings of a city that has grown rapidly, like a chaotic confusion of cement and glass, where at one time there only existed old homes that had surrendered to

the impulse of modern times. The house is named not because of the abundance of roses, as any flower shop might aptly be named or any stranger would suppose at first sight, but rather due to the names of its occupants, three kind, inoffensive old ladies that dedicate most of their time to the cultivation of their rose garden. Rosie Duarte, the oldest of them, was a mulatto in the autumn of her life with long bones and thick hair rolled into countless ringlets that she has had all eighty-one years of her life. The second oldest was Roseanne Peynado, sweet as can be, always in a festive mood even during the most dramatic moments, and the one in charge of the kitchen, preparing the meals according to the strict diet imposed by the doctors. And the youngest, Linda Rose Trujillo, temperamental but tenderly sympathetic, was the authority figure of the household, and in spite of her years one could easily see that, in her prime, she was once a woman of unsurpassed beauty.

They had come from the Dominican Island in a different time when they were very young, their spirits filled with dreams and illusions, certain of a more prosperous destiny in these lands. But they never noticed at what moment their untainted aspirations went off course and became trapped within the callous ambiance of the disreputable bars in the main market place. They began as second shift waitresses; later they became burlesque dancers until they finally established themselves as prostitutes in prestigious brothels, this being the only way they could find to make a living. Eventually, when they realized that they didn't have anything left to offer the clientele, they took refuge in voluntary retirement by combining the savings they had acquired over the years and buying the ancient

house where they began their old age in a dignified manner. In order to cover the cost of remodeling they had to mortgage the property, but it was necessary because the walls were about to collapse and the roof was in a state of disrepair. With that alone they had spent a fortune, since they needed to buy a batch of one thousand authentic Spanish tiles that had survived the destruction of an old colonial building in the historic cathedral neighborhood. Finally they devoted themselves mind and body to creating the biggest rose garden in the city, as they had always wanted. The soil all around the house was excellent for cultivation, as was evident by the manner in which a beautiful hanging garden soon sprouted that was the visual wonder of whoever had the luck to pass by. It was an effective remedy to erase the harsh past that had cost them dearly because they had spent too much love on men. Still, in these final years they had found the happiness they had always desired.

But this happiness began to falter at the beginning of last summer when a certified letter arrived in the mail from the bank indicating the amount past due on the mortgage. The terrible economic situation of the country did not treat them with much tolerance and it had been difficult to stay up to date with the loan payments. They did everything in their power to acquire the monthly payment, from imposing a strict budget on the household to secretly putting up for sale some of the old jewelry collected throughout their promiscuous years, the most of which were gifts with some sentimental value presented to them from grateful clients and occasional lovers. Three weeks earlier a construction firm interested in acquiring the property with plans to build a fifteen story condominium made a

generous offer to them. The firm was willing to pay them an enormous sum, but they refused the offer adamantly with the sincere argument that the house was their final refuge and they wouldn't trade it for all the oil in Alaska.

Last Monday, at ten in the morning, an official of the bank paid them a visit to discuss the status of the debt. He was a young man dressed impeccably with a suit and tie, and he carried with him a lambskin briefcase. It seemed that he had walked a great distance because he was sweating profusely in spite of the overcast cloud cover that had hung in the sky all morning looking like a floating fortress. Roseanne took him to the living room and offered him a glass of iced tea before informing Linda Rose of the visitor. A few minutes later she appeared with her gardening gloves and the pruning shears still in her hands.

"My name is Luis Mora" he said timidly. "I've come from the bank to talk about your mortgage".

"Are you a lawyer?" inquired Linda Rose in a stern manner.

"No, but I am a law student," he told her. "I only work at the bank part time."

Linda Rose was convinced that a student of law could be just as dangerous as any other person experienced in the field of jurisprudence. His capabilities were evident in the admirable qualities and noble character exhibited by this young man who seemed to be suffocating inside his impressive attire. While they waited for the other women, the bank representative thought it prudent to praise the decorum of the house and the beauty of the gardens. But Linda Rose didn't seem to appreciate his observations. To her, the purpose of the visit was no reason

to respond jovially to superficial compliments, so she decided to remain silent until the real business which brought him was disclosed. When the other ladies finally appeared, the young man opened his attaché case and took out the folder containing the documents pertaining to their mortgage. He wanted to explain certain legal procedures, but Linda Rose interrupted.

“You don’t need to talk about all that,” she told him. “We already know how much we owe. Skip the formal chatter and tell us what they’re going to do”.

The young man hesitated briefly.

“Fine, we’re thinking about starting the legal proceedings”.

“You’re going to take the house” exclaimed Roseanne with her hand on her chest unable to hide her anxiety. “How could you do that to three defenseless old women?”

For the first time the young man looked attentively at the women who remained seated in front of him, and he became startled because they really did look helpless. He felt compassion for them, for their ash colored hair and their weary bodies, especially for Rosie Duarte, who seemed very distant while she knitted hair on her rag doll.

“I’m so sorry,” he apologized nervously.

“You can be quite sure, young man,” said Linda Rose, “that if we were a little bit younger we would go out on the street and search for that money the way we used to do in our better days. But the way we look now we wouldn’t even be able to find someone to look at us with pity”.

“You could sell the house and buy a smaller one”, offered the young man, “maybe I could help you with the formalities. I know of a consortium interested in this property”. The women were surprised that the offer to buy the property was public knowledge, so the young man divulged his source of information. He had heard about the project because the construction firm had on-going commercial contracts with his bank, so he knew that they had applied for the funds to develop the condominium project. For that reason both parties were very interested in foreclosing the delinquent mortgage as soon as possible.

“Then its hopeless, they’re going to throw us out”, said Roseanne. “They’re going to send us to a nursing home.”

“Never,” cried Linda Rose. “We didn’t survive those smutty whorehouses and all that perversion on the street to end up being kept in a shelter for decrepit people. We have managed to meet people in high places the hard way.”

The young man wanted to insist that his alternative was the sanest option, but the women seemed absolutely determined and unreceptive to any negotiations. He put all the documents back in his briefcase, intending to go, not before offering certain advice on how to respond to the bank’s legal actions.

“See if they can extend the deadline while we get the money,” Roseanne dared to say with an encouraging smile.

Linda Rose intervened in a less passive tone.

“Better yet, tell those ruthless bankers”, she told him while pointing the pruning shears, “that these poor old ladies would rather die than lose their home.”

The young man didn't know what to say, and he felt embarrassed when he saw Rosie Duarte unbutton her shiny silk blouse and take out one of her worn and frail breasts to try to nurse her rag doll. Frightened, he looked for the door while the other two women could barely keep from laughing hysterically.

But they were quite aware that the situation was serious and not to be taken lightly. They went back to check their savings accounts and what remained in their jewelry boxes, mostly costume jewelry bought at the junk shops and flea markets of Central Avenue, and the large old chests containing their prized possessions which were worth a lot more to them than they were to anyone else. They didn't find anything that could help them face their financial dilemma. Instead, they began to rummage through the depths of their fondest memories, and others that weren't so pleasant, all of which in some way had led them to the inescapable line of work necessary to generate the sustenance to continue living. It was like opening a chest full of memories of their nostalgic travels, trials and tribulations. Nostalgia for the ships that dock in the port of San Pedro de Macorí to be filled with their cargos of sugar; for the flavor of the snow white rice of Bayaguana or the freshly ground coffee from the slopes of the Sierra de Baoruco; for the delicious aroma of the tobacco factories of Quinigua and La Vega; for the eternal salt mines of Bali, Montecristi, and Barahona and the rare minerals of Sánchez Ramírez and Cotui; for the opulent inhabitants of the Romanas, the golden skies of Cumayasa, the call of the birds of Cayo de Samaná and the peaceful Santiago Sundays of their Caribbean island forever remembered. They shuddered in terror, realizing all at once how much time had passed since they

had abandoned their land, and how out of neglect or forgetfulness, they had not fulfilled their promise to return there one day before they die.

The following Saturday, just like every other Saturday, Antolín Cucúas, came to the house. An Indian from the Gnobe Buglé reserve who assisted with the more arduous tasks in the garden, and whom the old women looked upon with special affection because of his gentleness and his praiseworthy attitude towards work, not to mention his vast knowledge of botanical cultivation that had been enormously useful in the growth of the roses, especially the most exotic varieties. He found the elderly ladies trying to prune a gardenia tree by chopping with a machete the overextended limb that was beginning to threaten a section of the rose garden. They sighed with relief to see him arrive because the intruding branch had already worn them out. Antolín Cucúas only had to give a few well aimed swings of the machete to remove the unwanted limb and throw it to the side.

“Damn” bellowed Rosanne triumphantly, “I’ve always said that behind every successful woman is an able bodied man.” They celebrated wearily with a pitcher of ice cold lemonade. While the Indian worked in silence, the old ladies frantically looked over every corner of the garden like guardians protecting the most valuable possession they had ever had over all the years of all their lives, something that had given them the satisfaction that they had never experienced from any man. Not even during their most passionate years, when they were still the owners of their own destinies and men would die for their love, spending their entire paychecks, even savings accounts, all the funds they could find anywhere

until they had nothing left to give, the women would end up leaving their suitors with broken hearts. Not even back then did they find the delight equal to having the home they had always dreamed of, with rocking chairs in the entrance hall, exquisite furniture and printed curtains in the windows with the garden flooded with roses where one could sit at the end of each day and become easily entranced by the intoxicating fragrance.

They considered the possibility of turning to certain influential friends who still held positions in the government and who might be able to help them out of their financial woes. They were all old clients, distinguished men with respectable home lives who occasionally strayed, but still had the refinement to pay cash with generous tips for an hour of gratifying company in the whorehouses. But after considering several names, they agreed that the only one able to lend a helping hand was Doctor Marino Figueroa, not because he had enough power to do it, but because of the passion he had once had for Linda Rose and the pleasant remembrances that had survived those treacherous years of debauchery.

They spent a nice afternoon fussing emotionally over pleasant memories and the imminent reunion. For a moment Linda Rose became full of doubts thinking that her old lover would die of fright to see her miserably withered, with very little of the splendor that once had provoked the memorable scandal that threatened his marriage. Unannounced, Rosie Duarte quickly approached and excitedly presented what she had brought from the back of her room.

“It’s an umbrella for toads,” she told them, extending her arm.

The old ladies admired the discovery. It was an enormous red and yellow colored mushroom with faint spots on the top. Linda Rose was just about to touch it when Antolín Cucúas snatched it with one hand and smashed it on the floor with his foot.

“Where did you get this?” he asked her sternly. “It’s very poisonous.”

The other ladies managed to get Rosie to show them where she had found it. On top of a rotten tree trunk, almost hidden in a humid corner, there remained two beautiful specimens. The Indian was about to destroy them with the machete, but Linda Rose intervened.

“Leave them”, she told him, leaning in front of the poisonous mushrooms.

“They’re too beautiful to be destroyed.”

“But only one would be enough to kill a horse”, the Indian disputed earnestly.

“Take it easy, nobody’s going to eat them”, she assured him with a kind smile.

Monday, at exactly eight o’clock in the morning, Linda Rose Trujillo presented herself at the office of Doctor Marino Figueroa, who in spite of shifting politics had managed to keep his position as a civil judge for the last fifteen years thanks to his clever foxy like maneuvers and his connections with the real power brokers. He received her immediately, as he always had done, although he had more urgent business. He was surprised to see that Linda Rose still glowed with some of her former magnificence; she looked radiant with her wide hat with small flowers and her oriental silk suit with embroidered designs. In contrast, she was

disheartened to see how much the man of her recollection had aged. His hair had thinned considerably and his face was ashen, he even used a cane to help him walk. They talked for a long time about their lives, trying not to ruin the tenderness of the reunion with memories too risqué for both of them. Doctor Marino Figueroa knew Linda Rose Trujillo well enough to know the meeting was not a casual visit, but he wanted to prolong the fascination of the moment in honor of the legendary romance they both had enjoyed to the point of shaking the foundation of the brothel where they met and loved with all the honesty that was possible for them.

“As old and worn as I am now”, he told her mischievously, “I am still capable of making you cry out like you used to.

She laughed out happily.

“Don’t tempt me”, she said sharply, “but really, you know we’re not up to that sort of thing anymore.”

It was an intense hour reviving their most happy memories. Finally Linda Rose confessed the true purpose of her visit. Doctor Figueroa listened attentively, and he was surprised to hear her voice crack and see the shine in her eyes revealing her first teardrops since though he had always known her to be an affectionate woman, she had always been emotionally resilient. He offered her his embroidered handkerchief and consoled her in her misery, and then she briefly scolded herself over her emotional outburst.

“I’m sorry”, she said sadly. “I probably look awful.”

“On the contrary” he said gallantly. “You’re more beautiful than ever.

Why didn’t you come sooner?”

Linda Rose Trujillo didn’t know how to respond, but the doctor knew that for a woman like her, accustomed to an independent, self-sufficient lifestyle, there couldn’t be a greater humiliation than receiving charity from men without giving something in return. In spite of everything he was compelled to provide the money to bring the house payments current and to make use of his influence to obtain an agreement to have their mortgage managed with special consideration. She thanked him gratefully, but she made it very clear that she was accepting the offer only under the condition that she would eventually pay back all the money to the last cent.

When Linda Rose returned home, she was unable to contain the joy she felt, not only because of the delightful reunion, but also because of the results achieved. The ladies celebrated by each one having a drink of brandy and dancing to the songs of their day that played on the old record player. They concluded the evening with a succulent supper by candle light, splurging on everything the doctors had forbidden: tripe soup with vegetables, fried corn fritters with codfish in a spicy tomato sauce and canned pâté on soda crackers. For dessert they enjoyed a medley of sorbets and ice creams with chocolate syrup; a complete mortal feast.

Two days later, When Linda Rose returned to the judge’s office to collect the funds, as they had agreed, she heard the terrible news: Doctor Marino Figueroa had died the night before, the victim of a heart attack. The details of the

incident remained as confidential as possible to protect not only the good name of the judge, but also the honor of the family. But during the funeral, which was tumultuous and attended by notable public figures of the aristocracy, Linda Rose unsuspectingly was to find out the truth concerning the untimely death.

She left the church, almost shoving through the crowd because she wanted to be close to the coffin until the last moment. She tried to get out in the open to escape unharmed, but she lost her way and then, stricken with panic, she realized that the crowd had stopped in front of the widow. The visibly grief-stricken woman looked at her without recognizing her before boarding the limousine with the aid of a very young man.

Then an unknown hand grabbed the arm of Linda Rose to steady her as the voice told her, “You’re a reckless old lady.”

The voice was from an old companion of her same vocation that now was administering a reputable brothel providing young girls for rent to a select clientele. It was this woman who informed her that Doctor Marino Figueroa, cursed by a sudden adolescent urge, had hired some of her young tarts for perhaps five hours, with the intention of reliving some fantasies from his former days of splendor. But during his first attempt his heart betrayed him. Although the state of affairs was treated with the utmost confidentiality, there were very few unaware of the exploit and no one ridiculed the shameful death. This was how the last remaining hope vanished for the old ladies to hold on to the property.

Several weeks later they received a notice from the bank indicating the urgent business of coming to a definite agreement. They had to wait a long time in

the cold lobby until a pretty secretary with a kind disposition led them to the office of the account manager who reported to them thoroughly with all the formalities that they would have to abandon the property by the time stipulated in the judicial order.

“We were hoping that it wouldn’t come to this”, he told them while looking over some documents. “But you do understand that we have to defend our client’s interests.”

Roseanne was groaning and frightened as she hugged Rosy Duarte. Rosy let out an inappropriate laugh and blew a loving kiss to the man who looked at her impassively.

“So you’re giving us a death sentence”, said Linda Rose.

“For god’s sake, it’s not all that bad.”

“It is for three old ladies that now have nothing.”

Although it seemed a bit exaggerated, their final decision was made coherently, with full use of their mental faculties after a long meditation. They had made it shortly after the unexpected death of Doctor Figueroa, when the last chance to acquire the money vanished and there remained nothing more to sell. They were so sure of what they were going to do and how they were going to do it that they cancelled their arrangements for the funeral services that they had bought in advance so they could put their personal affairs in order. Then they came to terms with some other heartfelt issues. Friday they got up very early, they filled all the flower vases in the house with roses and took some with them to adorn the altars of their church, where they also listened to morning mass and

took communion in silence. Later they took a long stroll through the small, quaint streets of the Cathedral district, they visited the trinket shops of Calidonia and they surveyed the vender's stands in the market. It was already past midday when they sat down to feed the pigeons on the sidewalk downtown.

They returned home as the rain began to threaten. Exhausted but contented they felt that they had known how to live with what life itself had made available to them. They prepared the meal together, set the table in regal fashion as if preparing a banquet for kings, with the porcelain plates and saucers from Italy, the embroidered handmade tablecloth, antique silver eating utensils and the candelabras used for special occasions. Later they put some recordings of classic boleros from that golden age on the record player and went upstairs to dress for dinner.

At exactly eight o'clock they came down dressed in their finest gowns. They looked like elderly queens, with their dresses, made of fine creped silk with graceful folds that draped elegantly reflecting spots of light. With their hair made up flawlessly, each one had a red rose inserted as a finishing touch. Roseanne served the soup, but she didn't dare try it until Linda Rose did and gave her approval.

"Excellent", she said with sincere pleasure. "Let's eat everyone."

"She doesn't like soup," remembered Roseanne.

Linda Rose took the spoon to feed Rosie with the candor of any nurturing mother. And Rosie, although she resisted at first, began to eat as always after being promised to be awarded with a cup of ice cream for her obedience. They

drank lemon grass tea in the living room while they softly sang to the melodies of their classical records and remembered absent loves, the hours lived, and shared pleasures. For a moment they wished they could return to childhood days to start over and take a less depraved path. When the tiredness set in, they went upstairs to go to sleep. They went to bed dressed; all three in the same canopied bed of fine wood, with a golden bedspread and goose down pillows. Linda Rose lay in the middle and let the heads of her two friends rest on her anguished breast to lull and comfort them in their final hour.

“Now you both know,” she reminded them tenderly, “when you see the shining light, follow it and don’t look back.”

In the morning, when Antolín Cucúas arrived to clean the garden, he was surprised to find the doors unlocked and the windows open. But he thought the old ladies must have gotten up earlier than usual and that they would already be in the patio performing their normal routine. He didn’t find them anywhere, and he really began to worry when he saw some rose bushes carelessly pruned and the garden tools abandoned all over the yard. A terrible premonition seized him when he discovered that the poisonous mushrooms had disappeared.

November 22, 1994

A Scream in the Night

From Rogelio Guerra Ávila's
El grito de la noche

Panama

The man woke up frightened with the first detonations that boomed in the distance. He had remained sleeping on one of the park benches, curled up to help resist the cold air that came in bursts from the sea. Next to him, protected by his knees, were the roses that he still hadn't been able to sell. At first he thought it was thunder forewarning a storm, since Ancón hill was overcast with a large cloud that seemed like an enormous ship swimming in front of the summit, and only a few wandering stars were falling back, thoughtfully, in the milieu. But he thought differently when he saw the repeated explosions that lit up the sleeping sky over the El Chorrillo² neighborhood.

It had not been a very good day for selling flowers. Since the late afternoon he had walked around the parks with his bunch of roses offering the lovers a small token of affection at a reasonable price. His approach was usually effective. He would interrupt the couples to appeal to the gallantry of the boyfriend while reciting with feigned sincerity a poem memorized from frequent repetition as a proclamation to highlight the worthiness of the girlfriend. But today luck was not on his side.

The detonations returned in a sequence now with more intensity, and the volume woke a quiet premonition in the man. Nobody else remained in the park. The lovers had left in search of hearth and home. Nobody had remained to

² A very poor section of Panama City that surrounded Panama's National Defense Force headquarters. It was the neighborhood most devastated during the US invasion to overthrow General Manuel Noriega.

languish in love over the wall that bordered the sea without horizon, no one even remained to embrace inside their vehicles, frightened perhaps of the uncertainty of the climate. The explosions could now be heard on the edges of Casco Viejo. The man thought that he could try his luck at the inauguration of the Christmas festivals. He took a long drink from his bottle of aguardiente³ and lit a cigarette while he counted the roses.

“Twelve yellow ones and fifteen red” he said with a sigh. “It’s time to go home”.

But he didn’t move from the bench because he remembered that he didn’t have a house anymore; just like everyone else had also had one, but for some time, not anymore. It was more like a reduced room in a partially demolished wooden house in the El Chorrillo neighborhood, with a communal bath that had its septic water overflowing in the interior patio and a ruined roof that blew off with the slightest waft of the wind. There he had intended to be happy with his woman and their children born one after the other while he tried to get by working like a dog, he opened and closed graves in the municipal cemetery in Amador during the day and sold roses in the parks and at the traffic lights during the night so they would have something to eat. But his woman had thrown him out of the house for being drunk and impertinent. That’s what she told him that day, when he returned from his activities at Amador and found his clothes packed in two pillowcases next to the door.

“Get out and take your stupid ideas somewhere else” she told him as if he was being sentenced. “I won’t go on with a man dumber than a box of rocks”.

³ The generic name for an inexpensive cane liquor produced throughout Latin America.

That's what she told him while ironing a bundle of other people's clothing. Begging didn't help much at all. He wasn't even able to convince her to give him a second chance. He appealed on behalf of the children, who remained in a corner watching him snivel and plea for forgiveness. But the woman was more decided than he could imagine because, without saying another word, sickened by his pleas, she took the bundles of clothes and threw them off the porch and behind them she also threw the bunch of roses wrapped in newspaper that he had just bought in the market place.

That had been a month ago. One month of wandering like a beggar through the streets, without the protection of a roof or the warmth of his family. At first, after peddling his flowers, he would return to the cemetery to pass the night between the graves. But later on he didn't even have the courage to return there, so he slept wherever he could dream and sit comfortably: in front of the sea where he was seduced by the noise of the waves as they crashed against the rocks and suffocated by the smell of shit.

He still didn't completely lose hope of recovering everything he'd lost. Because of that he returned to the house every day with the pretext of seeing his children and bringing them money for their daily rations. But before leaving, with a touching voice and a broken heart, he would ask the woman to compromise. And she would always refuse, shouting bad words at first, later becoming more tolerant but still unwavering. He returned to beg her without conditions, he told her about his decision to change, how he would stop drinking aguardiente, smoking marijuana, betting on the horses, playing the lottery and throwing dice.

He promised to be a different man if she would allow it, but there wasn't any way to change her mind. Her nerves of steel left him defeated.

Shortly thereafter someone told him that his woman was having an affair with a military man who was visiting the dwelling that was once his, and that she was also seen spending time at some of the cantinas in Santa Ana dressed in tight, flashy outfits and wearing makeup like the artists. But he didn't think it was possible because he knew his woman had never been fond of that sort of charade. He had taken her out of house in the past when she was younger; when she was still not much more than a girl, but she had always kept herself busy taking care of their home and raising the children, that's why she never showed any inclination for that sort of foolishness. "It must be cruel, jealous people making up rumors" he had thought without giving much credence to such commentaries. He did, however, suspend his visits to the house for many days.

The man went back to settle down on the park bench and was almost instantly overcome by weariness. He dreamed about his wife. He dreamed that she took his clothes down from the coat rack and stuffed them in two pillow cases, but not to throw them off the porch, but to give them away to whomever wanted them. He woke up before dawn, shaken by the noise that rumbled like thunder beneath him. He opened his eyes and saw the old part of the city illuminated with a disastrous shimmer and an enormous column of smoke that rose above El Chorrillo and was carried away by the ocean air. He listened to the hysterical shouting in the distance and the howling sirens and the whooping of helicopters over the summit of El Ancón. The man closed his eyes again to return

to his dreams. “Tomorrow I’ll go back to look for her again and ask for forgiveness”, he whispered. “She won’t be able to go through the Christmas holiday without me”. And with that certainty he let the dream captivate him.

Now the cold of the dawn woke him. The roses, protected by his knees, began to open their petals to the touch of the dew of the fleeting mist. The man didn’t even try to move since he knew that there still remained time to dream under the sky studded with stars, in front of the tranquil waters of the ocean and the comforting breeze; and happy, besides, for having known the sadness of laughter and the sweet relief of crying. It was December 20, 1989⁴; from that day on none of us would ever be the same.

⁴ El Chorrillo, the neighborhood most devastated during the US invasion to overthrow General Manuel Noriega is said to have suffered the deaths of 1000 to 5000 civilians.

The Crying Children

A Translation of Carlos Paniagua's
"El llanto de los niños"

Guatemala

Ana is a thin woman with dark eyes, straight hair and skin the color of cinnamon. She is quiet and obedient, but in the bedroom she liberates her fiery passion. I fell in love with her before I ever met her; from her own husband's words I found out about all her virtues, her defects, and even her most intimate secrets; reluctantly, he told me everything one time when I had to do a job for him.

She thought it was a coincidence that I came into her life right when he vanished, leaving her without an explanation, with debts, a three year old son and a baby girl. I fell in love with her, moved in with her and I took charge of all three of them; now my life is almost normal. They're not my kids, but that doesn't matter, I only want to kill them when I see them cry.

My boss allowed me a schedule to fit the needs of my family; I have time to take the kids to pre-school and leave Ana at the elementary school where she teaches. In the afternoon she picks up her kids while I'm at work. I almost always eat lunch alone; I slowly savor what she packs for me in plastic containers so I won't spend money on the street. Her cooking is mouth-watering; she likes to surprise me with yucca and chicharrones, fried plantains, and sweetened milk.

When I get home, the little ones are watching television, having already finished their homework; I almost always sit with them. I like Bugs Bunny and the Pink Panther; they prefer the stiff, rigid cartoon robots. I don't allow them to

watch soap operas or programs with violence: there is so much of that filth on the street that one shouldn't also have to tolerate it at home. Ana supports me because she wants the best for her kids and because she knows that I get pissed off when they don't obey me.

After dinner the kids play for awhile; then they bathe, brush their teeth and go to bed. Then, while Ana washes dishes, irons uniforms and polishes shoes I slowly read the police reports of the daily papers. In a secret ritual I compare the tranquility of my home with the utter confusion that exists behind those news stories. Today, for example, they found two bodies along the Pacific highway; according to the press, it was a couple; two students that had been tortured. The male victim was decapitated and found without fingernails; he had bruises, stab wounds and burns. They found cuts, evidence of rape and strangulation on the female's body. What the press didn't say is that he was writing imprudent propaganda and she was the leader of one of those groups that protests the unsolved disappearances of fellow citizens. They didn't even mention the screaming, the tears and the pleas when they did everything to her in front of him.

That's why I can't stand to see the kids cry: it's hopeless, their crying reminds me of the interrogations and their father's face when we were shocking him with electricity.

Paternity

A Translation of Horacio Castellanos Moya's
Paternidad

El Salvador

It could have been in another twilight, less clear. Sitting down, facing the lake, at the blue edge of the mountains, I savored the whiskey, the breeze. Something was out of place: the landscape, perfectly calm, or the yearning to revive the rage.

“It’s so nice that you’ve come” spoken from the rocking chair.

“Nice place...”

“They loan it to me a couple of times each year.”

One boat, barely audible, was approaching the dock.

“I wish I had a good camera to photograph that sun. It’s incredible. Look at it. It’s like a burning orange ready to fall behind the mountains.”

I lit a cigarette. I was cooling down quickly.

“Whose is it?” I asked.

“This house...? It belongs to one of the faculty’s professors. Her parents gave it to her. You wouldn’t believe how much I relax when I come here. I could spend hours on this deck...”

I supported my hands on the handrail and asked myself how long it would take for the first star to come out.

“I didn’t think you’d come. You didn’t realize how special this place was, did you?”

I asked for the large bottle of water.

“I’m gonna stay all week. You should also take advantage of the place for a while. It’ll do you good.”

“I leave early in the morning,” I muttered.

I served myself another whiskey, with the glass of water on the side.

“I’m gonna get some more coffee. Can I get you something from the kitchen?”

She came back with the carafe of coffee, with that same calm, confounded smile.

“Presto is already here,” she said.

I didn’t understand; she was probably referring to some dog.

“It’s the man that takes care of the house,” she explained.

“And his name is Presto?”

“Uh huh, funny, right? Still, the name is really quite appropriate: he comes early, waters the plants and the garden, he makes breakfast, he helps me with lunch and dinner, and he doesn’t leave until the last plate is washed.”

The sun seemed to be embedding itself into the mountains. And the semi-darkness was falling silently over the wind agitated waters.

I asked, “Didn’t you invite anyone else?”

“No, I prefer to come here by myself so I can make better use of my time.

Oh yeah, although I’m not exactly by myself now,” she commented, rubbing her

stomach with the smile of a co-conspirator; just what I was waiting for to twist my mind, as if the night, the sudden death of the landscape, was a punctual, unequivocal sign.

“I thought I wasn’t going to be able to come,” I intervened.”

“Why?”

“Business.”

“Are you doing the same thing,” she inquired.

I got up, supported by the handrail, with my back to the lake. Through the glass door of the dining room, I saw a man putting plates and silverware on the table. Presto: the perfect name for a servant.

“Sometimes I worry about you,” she mumbled. Then she became seriously thoughtful. “It troubles me how you can live like this permanently. What really scares me is the possibility that one day I’ll open the newspaper and find your picture along with some unsettling story...”

Presto walked toward the kitchen: he was a really frail old man, with a baseball cap, a gray sweater and baggy pants.

“What will I say to my son?”

I spun around to look at her and almost burnt my tongue as I lit another cigarette.

“I wanted to tell you that I went to see the doctor Monday,” she said in a hurry, impatiently. “He assured me that I’m doing really well and the baby is very big for only three months. Can you see that I’m starting to show?”

A cold burst slapped me in the back. I looked toward the lake: a faint glow close to the beach, a dark impenetrable background.

“Let’s jump in,” I signaled, “although I do have a bit of a cold.”

I grabbed the bottle of whiskey and my glass. She moved first with the tray, towards the living room.

“Dinner is almost ready,” she said.

I made myself comfortable on the couch, facing the fireplace.

From the hallway the servant greeted us. “Good Evening. Whenever you’re ready, Madam, dinner is served...”

But I had just made another drink. And I don’t like to eat while I drink.

“Will you be in the city for a few days,” she inquired.

“I don’t think so.”

“When will I see you again?”

“Who knows... this place is really peaceful...” I offered.

Presto asked if we wanted him to light a fire.

I told him, “Please.”

She looked at me, satisfied that I was feeling OK, as if that would offer her a hope. But unlike previous occasions, now she wanted to know, to attain some certainty, a guiding principle if you will.

“I would like it if you called once in a while. Wherever you are, It doesn’t matter. Call collect. It’s not that I anticipate us developing a relationship. I’m only asking because of this,” as she rubbed her stomach again.

“What I really want is for you to get rid of that”, I muttered.

She didn't seem to understand.

Presto came in with a stack of firewood and got ready to start the fire.

Out of the corner of my eye I observed his profile: Infuriated, the rage was tightening his jaw.

Squatting, Presto arranged the logs and lit a pine torch.

"There you go," he said, with the conviction of an expert. After that he returned to the kitchen.

The lonely crackle of the wood was isolated within the thick silence.

"I've been reading the Bible," I said.

The flames grew rapidly, intensely throwing out its dance in the shadows.

"Ecclesiastics, a tremendous book, says that everything comes from vanity.

I served myself another drink. It seemed like she wasn't listening.

"That what you have in your belly is also pure vanity..."

We looked each other in the eyes. In mine she could have seen boredom; in hers contempt, hate.

"I don't care what you think now," she said. "My son is the most important thing in my life and I'm going to have him at whatever cost."

The coffee had energized her with definitive gestures.

I thought how the scene could easily be fit into a soap opera, with our comments, the living room, the fireplace, even Presto would be a convincing character. I closed my eyes.

“Don’t forget this: I have always been completely up front with you. It was a deal: I explained to you that if we made love that night I could become pregnant, and that if I became pregnant I was going to have the child, that it would be my responsibility and I would be completely in charge of him. That was the deal. And you accepted. That’s why you’re not going to come to tell me now that you’ve changed your mind. The child is inside of me, it’s mine, and you can disappear tomorrow forever.”

I rested my head on the back of the couch: from the wall, over the fireplace, there hung a coat of arms.

“I want you to get rid of what you have in your belly,” I repeated insistently.

“You’re crazy,” she said, although now her tone was different: as if she had just decided how unnecessary it was to try to reason with me, because she was in control of the situation and my insolent posture was only a vacant demand. “Will you pay attention: I wouldn’t have an abortion for anything in the world.”

She got up. She walked up to the boom box.

“Your attitude bothers me,” she declared while rummaging through the compact discs. “If it causes you so much anxiety, just imagine that the child is only mine, when it’s all said and done you won’t have anything to do with it. Take into consideration that I’m already thirty-four years old and this is a crucial opportunity for me. Can’t you see how happy I am?”

I probably should have congratulated her, to be more understanding, more compassionate for her maternity, for the brat's future, for that beautiful contribution to humankind that remained hidden.

"What are you gonna play," I asked

"Tchaikovsky's concert, do you remember?"

Just what I needed: the nostalgia of some fucking or the recollection of an imprudent act that threatened to plunge me into paternity.

"I would have never thought that you read the Bible," she commented.

"That really surprises me. I would have pegged you for a reader of only commercial magazines and espionage novels."

"Just out of curiosity."

The piano began to pronounce itself between the sumptuous chords with a Majestic arrogance. She settled back on the sofa, again positioning herself to enjoy the music and the fire.

"That what you have in the belly is a monster," I muttered.

I rushed to put another log on the fire.

"You don't know what I am or what I've done. You don't even know my name. Everything that I've told you about me is an elaborate legend, exaggerated for your own benefit. Get rid of it."

I imagined Presto virtually pasted to the wall in the hallway, listening carefully.

“I don’t care,” she replied angrily. “I don’t care about your past or what you do or what your name is. For me you’re Carlos. I’ll tell my son that his father died in the war.”

“Which war?”

“I’ll make something up. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried.”

Presto could have been taking advantage of the orchestra’s sudden silence to hear the slightest whisper.

“Don’t you think that there are already enough bastards running around in the world?”

“I don’t want to hear your pointless philosophies... For me maternity is the most important thing that has ever happened to me.”

“Pointless philosophies?” She was right, “Why should I need an explanation?”

“Shall we eat?” she asked.

The whiskey and the music had relaxed me too much. I knew it because of the peacefulness, the warmth, a lack of concern that could have immobilized me for the rest of the night.

“Where’s the bathroom?”

“The first door on the right,” she signaled.

I walked with the certainty that Presto would have run from the hallway and skidded into the dining room to busy himself focusing on an insignificant object.

I urinated for a long time, as if the drinks had put my kidneys to work to their limits or as if some precise tension could have squeezed my bladder completely. I stood in front of the mirror for a while. I took the revolver from my jacket: I spun the cylinder.

“Let’s go to the dining room.” I heard her say as I was coming out of the bathroom.

The table was round; a wicker lamp hung from the ceiling, too close, with a light appropriate for a conspiratorial plot or a poker game. Presto brought the bowl with the soup.

“Did I tell you that I’m preparing a class about the political crisis in the eastern European countries?”

The soup almost scalded my esophagus.

“Well, we are working on it as a team, with Leti, the owner of this house, since I won’t be able to finish the semester. It still bothers me to think about it.”

“A monster,” I muttered, just as someone would say “the soup is too hot.”

She looked at me, annoyed, tired of my nonsense, of my stupid obsession with something that was already definite, maybe with the hope that in time my discomfort would dissipate or that I would go away forever, compliant and unknown.

Presto brought out the bread rolls that had recently come from the oven.

My movement was precise: the old man never knew what happened to him. She did, however, see everything with her eyes wide open. She may have tried to say something, but the second shot knocked her back over the chair.

Hero

A translation of Rogelio Guerra Ávila's
"Héroe"

Panama

One magnificent morning, while traveling down National Avenue driving his elegant sports car, Manuel Zubizarreta was attacked by rocks in the Cape Verde neighborhood by a group of delinquents who forced him to stop. He was an energetic Spaniard, the only son of a marriage of immigrant *Malageñans* who had made a fortune with a prestigious chain of restaurants. He had just returned after graduating from law school at the University of Chicago, and he was unfamiliar with the dangers in that tough section of the city. For that reason, without regard to the warnings expressed by his girlfriend, he parked on the side of the street and got out of the car to complain about his smashed windshield. The aggressors, three antisocial young men with an undesirable appearance, surrounded him, in a hostile way, armed with sections of construction pipe. Because of his initial anger Manuel realized that he had reacted prematurely, but it was too late to back down. With the tip of a section of pipe, one of the thieves touched Manuel's solid gold medallion that shook nervously from the chain because of his fear.

"That's a nice chain" said the reprobate. "So pass it over here if you want to get out of here with your life".

Manuel tried to return to the vehicle, but one of the delinquents gripped him by the arm and struck him once on the back and again in the head, knocking him to the ground, where his companions went through his pockets and snatched

his most valuable personal belongings. His girlfriend, seeing him covered in blood, escaped running from the vehicle, screaming with terror without any of the reprobates concerned about stopping her. Manuel didn't resist the beating. Only when the man that was holding him down tried to snatch the medallion from his neck did he have the resolve to confront him. But the indignant aggressor began to hit him in the face violently, and he really started to feel that he would not get out of there with his life. At that moment, out of nowhere, an unknown man appeared and was able to drive away the delinquents, who escaped into the rundown neighborhood nearby.

“Keep still” he told him while he tried to stop the bleeding on his face with a handkerchief, “I'm going to take you to get some medical care”.

From that moment on Manuel was not completely conscious of what was happening to him. He called out for his girlfriend in anguish and tried to stand up on his own. He was confused and disoriented. The unknown man carried him to his car and made him as comfortable as possible in the back seat. Then he rushed him to the closest hospital. The doctors in the emergency room immediately attended to the victim. While they stitched up his wounds, the unknown man answered the questions of the policeman on duty about the details of the assault and the descriptions of the criminals. Then the man elected to remain in the waiting room voluntarily until he found out the status of the victim's condition. Manuel Zubizarreta's parents appeared an hour after their son's arrival. An unidentified bystander coming from the cafeteria called to them to briefly explain what had occurred. The doctor on duty, a man who seemed too young for his

profession, met them in the main hall to give a quick report of the patient's condition.

"It's not that serious", he said, "but I would like for him to stay here under observation until tomorrow."

"Not in this place", said Manuel's father immediately. "I'm able to pay for better medical attention for my boy".

The doctor didn't seem to be offended.

"As you wish," he said.

Signing some documents, he concluded the conversation with a forced smile

"We'll send him wherever you like as long as we have an ambulance available. Now, if you'll excuse me, there is someone else waiting to hear about the boy."

The doctor was referring to the unknown man who was looking at them from a cautious distance, nervously perplexed. For Manuel's parents it took but a glance to recognize him and understand that this could not have been a mere coincidence. Their impression was even worse when they found out that this was the man who rescued their son from the cruelty of his assailants.

What Manuel's parents didn't realize was that the incident was one more surprise encounter in life that can cause one to miscalculate incredibly; it was not a premeditated plan, as they dared to insinuate. In reality, they were acquainted with the unknown man; his name was Augusto Chifundo. He was a twenty-nine year old mestizo, reserved and happy who worked as a public works inspector

with the municipality. He was married to Aguedita Rivas, his lifelong girlfriend, and they lived with their two children in a wood room without partitions in the neighborhood called the Conception. Many years before, he had been an employee of the Zubizarreta family. Back then he was a hardworking attentive adolescent who served as a kitchen helper after his classes at the Faith and Happiness High School, and all day on Saturdays. But more than a dishwasher and general kitchen apprentice, Augusto Chifundo came to be, at that time, Manuel Zubizarreta's best friend.

They met one rainy afternoon during a soccer game. It was the customary match between the high school of affluent students and the other of the poor children, where both sides gave everything they had in them for different reasons, some out of love for the game, others out of pride, but all with one common interest-to win. During the first period, while attempting a sensational play, Manuel suffered an injury to his ankle that put him out of the game. Augusto, whose mother was a volunteer worker for the Red Cross, had certain knowledge of basic first aid and offered to attend him while the technical director was bringing the first aid kit. He gave him a quick massage and wrapped a first aid bandage that was worthy of the praise of the doctor that examined him in a clinic for the privileged wealthy people.

The best way the Zubizarreta family could find to extend their appreciation to Augusto for his gesture was inviting him to eat in their restaurant. They received him in person and they offered him the best table in the house where Manuel waited for him, with a cast on the ankle of his injured leg and more

anxious to talk about the outcome of the game than anything else. His parents were really charming to him, although their kindness was rooted in the Iberian custom of paying very well for favors, especially if they come from a social class inferior to one's own. But Manuel was free of such racial prejudices, absurd in our times, and enjoyed sharing the supper with his new friend.

For Augusto, it was a king's banquet. Manuel had the kitchen bring a little of each plate so his friend would have the opportunity to sample Spanish delicacies: Valencian paella, stuffed peppers with cod, smoked salmon and other epicurean delights. They talked so much and communicated with such ease that by the end of the evening they felt that they had been friends all their lives. It was Manuel that came straight to the point about speaking to his parents about getting him a part time job in the restaurant.

"It's to help you a little", he said. "I know they'll agree to it".

At first Augusto felt uncomfortable, but later reality set in. A little money would come in handy to help around the house and make it easier to continue his studies.

"I wouldn't want you to bother", said Augusto embarrassed, "but if you really could I would be very grateful".

It wasn't easy for Manuel to convince his parents to give his friend a job, but in the end they conceded due to the perseverance of their son, who always knew how to persuade them skillfully to get what he wanted. As a result, Augusto Chifundo entered the large kitchen door and quickly earned the respect of his working companions because he was diligent and never complained about

anything. He had nerves of steel, especially with Manuel's mother, with whom he forever remained patient despite her archaic racist fixation that wouldn't allow her eyes to recognize the value of the exceedingly close friendship that came about between her son and the part time employee. She didn't even show any gratitude for the selflessness with which Augusto sacrificed part of his free time to tutor Manuel with some of his more difficult courses in spite of the qualified professors from his illustrious catholic prep school. For both young men it was a great camaraderie that lasted for months.

After recovering from his injury, Manuel returned to practice soccer, but he had to hide it from his parents who had forbidden him to play due to medical recommendations. One Sunday Augusto invited him to a friendly game with the boys from his neighborhood. The playing field was uneven and rough; nothing like the finely trimmed and measured field that he was accustomed to playing on with friends from his school. Still, it was a pleasant experience because for the first time he was playing for the simple pleasure of playing, not in hopes of earning some qualification, and because the whole gang, a splendid, easygoing group, welcomed him as one of them. In a short time, Manuel adapted to the rough style of play without rules and preferred to escape the routine Sunday matches at his school where he was in his fifth year of secondary studies to interact in the tougher, underprivileged communities.

In this way, Augusto Chifundo began to have a significant influence on the Zubizarreta family that was intolerable for Manuel's parents. They both agreed that they weren't able to appeal to Manuel's better judgment. First, they

used their overwhelming parental psychology which proved ineffective against Manuel's defiant character. After that, they chose another option: they changed Augusto's work schedule so that it would not coincide with that of Manuel. Finally, after they discovered their son's ventures into the dangerous neighborhoods in the undesirable areas, they took the insistent position that this was more than they could allow, and Manuel's mother dared to address the matter in her own way. She quietly prepared the definitive plan not only to get rid of Augusto, but also to terminate that friendship once and for all.

One Saturday night, after a steady flow of diners, Manuel's mother purposely went to the back office to calculate the proceeds of the evening while Augusto cleaned the grill at her request. They were alone on the premises and this was the golden opportunity that she had been waiting for to make her move. Augusto also polished the floor, washed all the dishes down to the last spoon and took out the sacks of trash to the receptacles in the alley. At that moment, while the boy chatted with the men on the garbage truck, she placed a large quantity of cash inside the shelf where the employees kept their belongings, right inside the section designated for Augusto.

It was an unprecedented scandal. Upon discovering the theft, Manuel's mother suffered a nervous breakdown. Her husband, a very dominant man, searched all over the restaurant before calling the police. The officials were even more aggressive. During the intense questioning, after considering all the possibilities there remained only one suspect. Augusto was horrified when they took the lost money from his compartment on the shelf, and even as he swore on

his father's grave, there was nothing he could say to convince them he was innocent; that he had no idea how the stolen money was found inside his personal effects. They took him handcuffed from the premises and drove him in a patrol car to the juvenile detention facility.

He was only detained for two weeks in the dark cells of the juvenile prison, not because of any successful maneuvers by the public defender who had taken an interest in his case, but because the Zubizarreta family finally dropped the charges, not for him, but for Augusto's mother, who implored them to have some pity on her son, and for Manuel, who negotiated for his friend under whatever condition his parents would have liked to impose.

"All right" said his mother, "but in exchange for that you will not go back to see that delinquent for any reason. From this you will learn that you can never hope for anything good from those people."

For that reason, fourteen years after that incident, it was not easy to believe that their fearful reunion was a mere coincidence of destiny. But it was. Augusto Chifundo was traveling in his dilapidated vehicle when he saw the three men that were beating their victim in the pure light of day while no one lifted a finger to help him. At first he didn't know who it was. Not until he wiped the blood from his face did he discover with surprise that it was his old friend. Three days later, while he was convalescing on the third floor of the hospital, Manuel was visited by Augusto. He didn't have much to say, except that he had been staying very busy. "I only came to return this," said Augusto taking from his

pocket the gold pendant that he had been able to recover from the assailants. “I’m not accustomed to taking what doesn’t belong to me.”

Manuel saw him as a hardened man filled with resentment. He felt a little embarrassed.

“Thanks” he said. “I owe you another one”

“You don’t owe me anything” he said. “I don’t want your family to feel obliged to pay me for another favor.”

That comment was a stab that went directly to his heart. Augusto was about to leave, but Manuel stopped him. “Wait” he told him, “we have to talk.”

“We should have talked a long time ago” Augusto told him as Manuel looked directly into his eyes. He saw in them an excessive firmness. “It’s too late now”.

It took two weeks for Manuel to find out where Augusto lived. He arrived unexpectedly at the small modest pastel colored house. When Aguedita Rivas opened the door, she found him insecure and nervous under the eaves of bougainvillea at the entrance. It wasn’t hard for her to recognize him because she had pictured him from Augusto’s occasional portrayal that he mostly kept secret in the memories of his happy childhood. The house had an impoverished glow of dignity, with old but clean furniture, lace curtains and ceramic decorations. On the bed the children were playing a board game with dice. “Augusto knew you would be coming” said Aguedita while inviting him to a soft drink, “but he’s not here at the moment. He’s out taking care of some business.”

“Did he want me to come by?”

Aguedita let out a sigh and responded without looking at him. “He didn’t ever intend to have anything more to do with the Zubizarretas.” But he has also always believed in the forces of destiny. He is a very respectable spirited man.

“I know he’s a great man,” said Manuel decisively. “At that time we were much younger and one makes mistakes.”

Aguedita Rivas wasn’t able to contain the tears that began to flow from her eyes. She certainly didn’t admit any validity to the comment made by Manuel, and she told him firmly, “Augusto has never done anything that he should regret. He’s a hard worker and a great father, more than you could say of many other privileged people that are born with silver spoons in their mouths.”

Manuel looked at the children for a moment. Aguedita did the same and said something as if she was thinking out loud. “There is nothing sadder for a father than not being able to see your kids grow up.” After that she looked at Manuel and added, “Augusto is dying.”

She then explained to him her husband’s severe condition. A year ago, tortured by a series of aches and pains that were making everyday activities unbearable, Augusto received the definitive diagnosis from the best doctors of the country’s social health care system. His kidneys had stopped functioning and an organ transplant was the only option for survival. Since then, Augusto began a determined fight to continue forward with endless formalities in order to find a donor. He was placed on an extensive waiting list while he tried to alleviate the pains with medicines that were already useless due to the increasing gravity of his condition. At this stage, without an alternative for better attention and without the

most remote possibility of acquiring a kidney, he had chosen to wait for the end with resignation. “He is overjoyed that life has permitted him to see you again before he dies, but don’t expect much from him.”

Manuel returned to his vehicle and because of this revelation his heart was torn to pieces. He was extremely devastated by the misfortune. Before putting the car in gear he looked at the children that were waving good bye to him from the entrance, and he had to give in to the weight of such an unjust reality. Leaning against the steering wheel, Manuel cried.

He certainly would not stand by idly while his old friend had to live each day fearing it would be his last as he was slowly being consumed by his sickness. Manuel used all the resources available to him; he turned to influential associates of the family and even called on other people that owed him favors. He soon realized that his urgent mission was a futile endeavor that would leave him defeated because there were so many stubbornly complicated bureaucratic obstacles. One doctor connected with the department of organ transplants left him completely discouraged. “In this country,” he told him, “if someone needs a new organ and doesn’t have the cash, he will be better off to resign himself to a hopeless, inevitable conclusion. Unless he can find a live donor it’s almost impossible.” Manuel understood. Disheartened, he had to discontinue the search. For Augusto, the efforts of finding a donor had to be more destructive to him than the sickness itself.

Manuel had established a secret alliance with Aguedita to continue inquiring about his state of health and his own progress for the search of a donor.

He was able, with much difficulty, to persuade Aguedita to accept some money for the medicines without informing Augusto.

After six weeks of going up and down the same stairs on countless occasions, Manuel concluded that the only hope of survival would be with his influence. The reality was that Augusto would have to be taken to a foreign country.

The Zubizarretas were shocked to find out, through observations of some friends of Manuel's tireless fight that had begun over some cause that had nothing to do with him. He was completely neglecting his marriage plans and the important position that had been reserved for him at a law firm. They became even more alarmed to find out the name of the recipient of such concern. They tried to reason with him, they reminded him of the old scandal caused by Augusto Chifundo years before, but he remained resolutely insistent and even dared to ask them for the money necessary to send him to some specialized clinic in the United States or Columbia.

"Have you lost your mind?" said Doña Zidia grabbing him by the shirt, "that man is a criminal." Manuel reminded her, "THAT MAN SAVED MY LIFE". "Surely in collusion with those delinquents," said his father. "Those people are capable of anything. He's probably not even sick".

Manuel didn't accept those absurd arguments and he criticized the callousness of his parents. Doña Zidia lost her patience. "It's very hard for me to believe that you could be so stupid," she said. Hasn't anything that I've done helped you stay away from this predator?

Those words helped Manuel to establish, fearfully, a stunning assessment of the doubtful appraisal that after all those years had shielded his heartfelt belief of Augusto's innocence. "Was it you that put the money in Augusto's things?" he said looking directly into her eyes. His father reprimanded him for the disrespectful outburst although he pretended not to hear what Manuel said. At first Doña Zidia nervously denied it, but afterward tried to justify herself due to the protective instinct of motherly love. "How could you be capable of such a thing?" Manuel asked her distressfully. She answered, "For you, I am capable of anything."

"I see. And I, as your son must correct your errors."

That same night Manuel went to Augusto's house determined to face him, to ask for forgiveness for all the damage his family had caused him and to plead for him, on his knees if necessary, to accept all the help that he could offer in order to fight together against his death. But he was greeted with the terrible news that Augusto had suffered a severe relapse and had to be hospitalized in the intensive care unit. He found Aguedita in a somber waiting room, alone and sad, with the frightening news that Augusto wasn't able to wait anymore.

Augusto was resting in a room he was sharing with ten other patients, connected to a series of machines that were helping to keep him alive. He opened his eyes barely feeling Manuel's presence next to the bed. He looked at him for a moment behind his tears of terror and extended his tired hand. There he was sunken in the long gown of a dying man. And with the stiff body, he seemed like another person.

“I know everything” Manuel told him with a great effort to remain steady. “My sickness is not a secret to anyone.” “I’m talking about the money that was lost. I always knew it was my mother, but you preferred to keep it quiet and tolerate all of it even though you were innocent; all in honor of our friendship”. With his tired voice he told him “that’s what was important”.

“I know it. And it still is, and it always will be. You’re not gonna die because I’m gonna take care of this in a jiffy”. “There isn’t anymore time”.

Manuel didn’t respond. At that moment, the doctor on duty appeared with two nurses making their nightly rounds and Manuel left the bed for a moment to find out the truth about the condition of his friend. “There isn’t much more we can do for him,” the doctor whispered, “he needs an operation as soon as possible, but there isn’t a donor.” “Then prepare everything immediately.” he said in a tone of voice that made an impression on the doctor. “He now has a doctor!” After undergoing all the strict tests demanded by the hospital administration, Manuel signed the papers confirming that he himself had responsibly made his decision to be the donor.

Augusto Chifundo underwent an operation that took four hours with three doctors that specialized in organ transplants. The following forty-eight hours were decisive for the patient because there were many risks and the success of the operation depended on the willingness of Augusto’s body to accept the transplanted kidney without problems. A week later they passed by the recovery room with a more encouraging diagnosis. He had a much better appearance, but he was very restless and bad tempered because he felt that they weren’t being

sincere with him. His wife also seemed reserved. Her weeping surprised him while he pretended to be sleeping and this perception of sadness he saw in her tarnished the happiness of having her still by his side.

Two weeks after the operation, he was able to eat some solid food and stand up by the bed with the help of Aguedita. That day, after being examined by the doctors that performed the operation, Augusto demanded to know the details of the operation. They looked at each other and then at Aguedita, and decided that there was no longer reason to remain silent. Then he knew. His donor had suffered a heart attack on the operating table, and all of the efforts of the best qualified specialists in the hospital were not able to save his life. “That boy was a hero,” one of the doctors concluded. “There aren’t many people that would risk their lives like this for another person. Augusto let out a cry that seemed to come from his soul.

“And who was my donor?” he asked fearfully. “I never thought it was someone still living.”

“You’re telling me you didn’t know?” asked the other doctor. Augusto looked at Aguedita and she wasn’t able to contain her grief stricken burst of tears. Her emotional eruption tormented him even more and a vision of Manuel almost knocked him over. With horror he understood why he hadn’t come back to see him since that last occasion when he was at his side assuring him that he wasn’t going to die. Aguedita then gave him the gold chain and pendant that Manuel treasured and that Augusto was able to recover from the assailants. She told him that the Zubizarretas, devastated with anguish, had given it to him two days after

the burial, not as a desperate remedy to relieve their anguish, but because now, in some way, they felt that inside the mestizo that was so hated by them, a piece of Manuel's body would continue to live.

September 29, 1994

A Typical Story

A Translation of Ana Cristina Rossi's "Una historia corriente"

Costa Rica

At eighteen years of age I lost my virginity to Hugo. Totally in love, at nineteen we were married. I was so in love that it didn't bother me not to feel anything at all while we made love.

I remember the first time we did it. A perfect atmosphere, peaceful: the room at his lodging, in Boston, where he was taking an English course. It was over quickly, I didn't feel any pleasure but Hugo looked so proudly satisfied that I didn't say anything to him. When he asked me if I had liked it I told him that I did.

Back in Costa Rica, Laura, my best friend, asked me excitedly: "Okay, have you now done it for the first time? How was it?" I couldn't lie to her, I told her I was disappointed, everything happened too fast. "Uh huh," she told me with the pretense of someone who knows a lot, "yes, I see, sex in a flash, three split second thrusts and that's it." Laura had a way of describing things effectively in a vulgar manner but right on target. Yes that's how our first night was, three split second thrusts and that was it.

I hoped that the ordeal would get better with time. I swore that everything would get better when we got married; I believed that everything would sort itself out without having to talk to him. I was so much in love with Hugo that I didn't want to risk aggravating or causing him any difficulty. Besides I myself, didn't

know what it was that was bothering me: I loved Hugo; he was the man of my dreams. I liked his style; the way he dressed, and spoke. I liked his body, his voice and eyes fascinated me. But everything always happened so fast. Eventually I gave in to the thought that I was slow, too slow, and in my mind I decided to look for a sexologist to see if I could find help to enjoy making love as quickly as Hugo. Laura often tried to discuss the dilemma with me, but it embarrassed me and I would always cut her off. I told her that I didn't want to talk about it. Sure, down deep I knew that it wasn't out of shame, we had been friends since the first grade and we had always trusted each other completely. I didn't want to discuss the problem with her anymore because she had always implied that the problem was not mine, rather Hugo's shortcomings and that being recently married and so in love while still studying, I was avoiding, out of some type of sacred fear, to cause Hugo any problem.

After a while Laura left the country. The only person that knew about my frustration was gone.

I had a well defined goal in life: to become an outstanding professional. I studied with passion, subliminally, as many psychologists would say, or as I would say many years later. At times I would daydream and imagine talking to Hugo, asking him to teach me to feel more. I knew that he was an experienced man; while previous boyfriends had told me funny stories expressing amusement over their sexual initiations with brazen prostitutes and Hugo's constant visits to those places. He was an experienced man; he had to know how other women were stimulated. Many times I was at the point of telling him what was happening to

me, but I didn't for fear of confessing that for years I had been imitating a pleasure that I didn't know, that I had only read about in magazines and novels, or from what I had seen at times in segments in a movie at the cinema or on television.

After three years of marriage and the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, I asked him, now as a married man, if he had continued visiting prostitutes. He told me that he did now and then. I begged him not to do it anymore, out of respect for the family and the risk of infection; we already had two children. He swore to me that he would never go back to the brothels. And I believed him.

I finished my studies and dedicated myself to my work with enthusiasm, I loved my profession. I also loved being the mother of two children, and the passion that I dedicated to the two vocations took up most of my time.

My devotion was fruitful and I began to be successful and popular. I became a known figure, almost a celebrity.

As I became well known the obstacle of resolving my problems of intimacy returned. I was even embarrassed to tell my friends about it. The famous Diana Fuentes —imagine that—, who interviews guerilla leaders and dictators, who doesn't give in to anything before finding truthful and accurate news, doesn't dare to be sincere with her husband and knows nothing of pleasure.... I constantly pictured somebody finding out about my problem —it was so deep rooted! At times I also imagined that they were publishing it in one of the tabloids.

“A slightly paranoid attitude,” the legal psychologist that finally helped me would say, finally- later- after so many things happened. But I don’t want to get ahead of myself.

After twelve years of blissful marriage –yes, it was a happy marriage in spite of the problem, I began to develop an unbearable pain in my neck and back which affected my productivity notably.

I visited many doctors that specialized in muscular pains. They all told me the same thing: its tension. Work less, relax. Try to have your husband help more with the children. Hugo? Help me with the kids? How naïve can the doctors be? The women take care of the children, the man doesn’t bother. Besides, I didn’t feel that the children were a burden; on the contrary, they entertained me. And work less? God, my job was a constant source of pleasure! I hated and feared that pain not because of the pain itself, but rather because it hampered the pleasure and enthusiasm that were always habitual for me in my work.

At the beginning of our marriage I had read articles about feminine frigidity. But the conclusion of all those articles suggested that it be discussed between partners, after a few years I didn’t read them anymore. I avoided all conversation about the topic. I felt guilty. I thought about Hugo, my loving Hugo, finding out that I had been faking it in bed for so many years. And that I, the illustrious voice of truth, had been deceiving him all that time. It would be horrible, terrible; if I were to tell him, I would lose all of his trust, the trust that was the foundation of our marriage, our beautiful family: Hugo and the two children that were my pride and joy. They were good, generous, intelligent kids

that had always accepted with a good disposition their professionally well-known mother.

The muscular pain intensified. As much as I tried to conceal it I couldn't hide it. Without realizing it, I adopted the custom of rubbing my neck and twisting my head. One of my doctors gave me a prescription and when the pain was so bad that I wasn't able to sleep or work it was really necessary to inject myself with ampoules of an anti-inflammatory called Voltarin.

One morning when I had to travel to San Salvador to cover an important event, I woke up with my jaw completely paralyzed. The pain spread from my neck all the way down, I couldn't even move. The doctor came on an emergency call to give me an injection. Fortunately, an hour later the pain subsided and I didn't miss my flight. Knowing that there was a medicine adequate enough to relieve my symptoms reassured me and with the medicine my discomfort diminished.

But later on I suffered the worst attack of pain that I ever had in my life. It happened one weekend when Hugo had to travel to Panama on business, the kids had been invited to a farm and our domestic helper also had to leave for the weekend. I don't know how, but that Friday night I managed to drive to the closest pharmacy and I asked to see the pharmacist. A very nice handsome man of about fifty years old waited on me. "Look," he told me, "they've just passed a new law that prohibits injections in the pharmacy. I can't inject you here, but let's do this. Take an anti-inflammatory pill orally, stay seated here and within a half

hour, if the pain hasn't subsided, I'll take you to your house and give you the injection."

Such care and generosity surprised me; it must have been because I'm well known. I thought about how that was at least good for something-to be known. I took the pill and sat down to wait for relief.

The pharmacist's name was Fernando and he said that he saw all my broadcasts and added that he admired me. It made me feel good when I heard that. He didn't say that that he admired my work; he said that he admired me. Out of the corner of my eye I looked at myself in the mirror. No, I wasn't ugly, I looked all right.

I started to feel the pain subside and I said thank you for the pill to Fernando. Fernando took my hand and he didn't let go, he looked me in the eyes. "Diana," he finally said, "I'm going to give you my home telephone number. If you need me to give you an injection or anything else, don't hesitate to call me. At any hour whether it is at night or early in the morning you can call me. Just give me your address and I'll come to help you. You can count on me."

He let go of my hand and gave me his card after writing his private numbers on the other side.

I returned home relaxed, almost without pain. What luck to have found a nice pharmacist to depend on so close to home.

I went to sleep immediately.

But the following night, perhaps because it was the first weekend in my entire married life that I was spending alone, perhaps because the television

station had little work, the pain returned even worse than before. I woke up at midnight writhing in pain. Besides suffering from a tendency to grind my teeth while sleeping from rubbing my jaw so hard, I broke a molar in half. The pain was so excruciating that I fainted.

When I regained consciousness I crawled to the telephone and called Fernando. "Give me your address," he told me, "I'll be right there." I let him know that I could hardly walk, and that when he sounded the horn upon arrival, I would open the large doors of the carport from inside. Then he could pull his car right in. "Perfect," he said, "I'm leaving now".

I remained seated in front of the door waiting for him, my sight was clouded from the intense pain, I couldn't even think.

Later I recalled everything about that night. For example, the following day I thought about what Fernando would have told his wife.

In about thirty minutes I heard a vehicle. He sounded the horn discreetly. I pushed the button and the electric car port doors opened. Fernando drove his car right in. I could barely get up to open the door. With the care of a perfect professional, he inquired about the problem. I related to him how I had awakened in agony. I could barely talk about the pain with my molar broken and my sore, brittle neck. He asked me to turn on a bright light and made me open my mouth. "Hmm, since you're in so much pain maybe you damaged a nerve. You also seem to have fibrositis, a serious problem of muscular tension." Concerned, he looked at me and added: "I brought several ampoules of voltarin. I'll give you an injection if you like. It will really ease the pain." I told him, "Please."

We went to my bedroom. He asked me to lie on my side. He took out the disposable syringe and began to get it ready. The smell of alcohol filled the room. Instead of asking me to raise my long, baggy, Chinese silk pajamas, he put his warm hand securely over my bottom. He tested it out. When he had chosen the spot, he, himself slowly raised my pajamas. Then he lowered my bikini briefs that I always use for sleeping. "Relax," he told me. "You'll see that it won't hurt a bit." He passed his soft, skillful hand over my backside many times and the contact with his fingers gave me a pleasant feeling that drove me crazy enough to stiffen. "What's wrong, are you cold?" he asked. "No, I'm not cold," I told him almost whispering, "I feel fine". It was the truth. In spite of the pain and the goose bumps, I was overcome with a soft feeling of warmth. Suddenly he said, "It's very easy to give an injection like this in the backside." Right then he stuck me with the needle. I didn't even feel it. When he took it out, he used some cotton with alcohol and began to massage the area. "The secret to keep it from hurting," he said, "is to massage it so all the liquid penetrates and gets absorbed." Using the cotton with alcohol he gave my backside a very prolonged massage. I noticed that he was enjoying it as much or more than I. "Relax Diana," he said with a smile.

I also smiled and sighed with relief. After a moment I turned over and moved his hand to pull my pajamas back down. I began to feel the effects of the medicine. I told him. He nodded and added, "Yes, an intramuscular injection done properly enters the blood stream immediately." He turned off the bedroom light and the only remaining light came from the small night stand. He returned to my side: "Before I leave let me see how it is." He softly took hold of me and turned

me over. I let him do it. He pulled up my Chinese pajama again and advised me to take off my panties to ease the pressure on the buttock “since we injected much liquid they may restrict the flow of the medicine”. When I stretched out my arms to take off my underwear, he stopped me: “Don’t exert yourself, you’re already relaxed, let me take them off so the pain doesn’t return.” He took off my panties carefully. After that, unexpectedly, he held me by the shoulders and slowly, delicately, asking me repeatedly if I was hurting, he turned me over. He looked at my lower abdomen, my pubic hair. He told me: You’re a special woman”. When I listened to his words I felt my body again being invaded by an intense heat, a pleasurable heat that was concentrated in my pelvis, in my hips and it relaxed me. I closed my eyes and I let him look at me. The pain had disappeared. I heard him breathing intensely.

I began to get excited, an arousal that I had never felt in my adult life. It was like that tremendous excitement I felt as a girl playing doctor with my cousins.

He put his hand on my stomach; he caressed me tenderly, affectionately. He also kissed my thighs slowly. I could only think “What is this sensation, what is this sensation.” His warm breath between my legs was wonderful, his eyes observing me were wonderful, and his fingers were wonderful, pausing with an infinite slowness over my body. Then, with the grace of a talented lover his eyes focused on my breasts. He was awakening all the repressed sensations, from the depths of my body after all those years. After hours of unknown caresses, he lifted his weight over my body. He whispered that he wanted me very much, since the

first time he'd seen me on television he wanted me very much. He lowered himself with his mouth again, kissing me all over. And that's when I began to climax. A wave of blood and fire lifted me, it lifted me and compelled me to bite, scratch and writhe in violent spasms. I felt that I was losing myself in the past, back to my childhood.

When I recovered, Fernando was looking at me with a smile. "Are you O.K.?" he asked. I was still catching my breath. "I think you were hyperventilating, but your lips are red and you look very pretty," he said tenderly. I realized that he hadn't undressed. I curiously looked him in the eyes. He responded: "No, that's not important. I enjoyed it very much. Besides, it's all for YOU."

We made love again. This time he undressed and everything was even slower. The extremely slow caresses seemed a lot like an agonizing ecstasy.

We slept. Early in the morning he woke up startled. "I should leave," he whispered. He gave me a very long, tender kiss, and he proposed openly: I want to be your lover, Diana, your only lover. You will also be the only one for me. "I like you very much." What I had experienced was so amazing that I told him yes.

Hugo returned and bringing into play for the first time my body, my relief, and my unusual contentment, I went to look for him at the airport. When we got home the children still had not returned from high school and I took him to the bedroom. Although this may have caused Hugo some suspicion, I took the initiative. But he was disinterested, and stubbornly rejected me. "What's wrong with you, Diana? I'm exhausted." I tried to convince him. I undressed. I did

something that according to some article I'd read, every man enjoys: I put his penis between my lips. It really did arouse him. But when I tried to make him do the same thing to me, he spit it out with revulsion. "What's up with you," he said, "That's only for queers and dogs." How can you suggest that I do such a filthy thing? I was paralyzed. But he was aroused. He penetrated me with three quick thrusts and that was it.

So the afternoon that Fernando called saying: "I miss my lover," I ran to him. The wondrously delightful Fernando wasn't repulsed with any part of my body. On the contrary, he wanted to devour me constantly over and over. He wasn't concerned about his own satisfaction and I told him. "Sure, I think about myself," he answered, "I think only about myself because what I like most is giving you pleasure, to see you enjoy yourself, to see how your face changes and to feel that force of a wild colt hyperventilating. And when I see you on TV, with your sensual mouth that has not been adored until recently, I feel like there couldn't be a happier man than I. It makes me want to shout out to the world that those are the lips that kiss me."

It wasn't easy to invent maneuvers to see each other. I had to integrate my demanding professional life and my domestic duties and obligations at home, with the blessed fire burning inside me. I had to invent strategic schemes. Before my health returned Hugo asked: "Diana, how did you get rid of your pain?" I invented the notion of sessions with a supposed Chinese acupuncturist to explain my absence during my rendezvous' with Fernando.

Little by little I told Fernando about my life. I told him everything, my frigidness, my parochial education. He told me about his ailing wife and his already grown children.

The relation with Fernando rekindled my curiosity. I read everything that I had never read before about sex and psychoanalysis.

We became daring. We went to expositions together and attended lectures. We connected very much through our exchange of ideas.

But one day he told me: “You have to fly with your own wings, babe.” At that moment I thought the end was imminent. “What do you mean with my own wings,” “Yes, you must leave Hugo.” I asked, “So that we could get married?” No, Diana, I told you from the beginning that I’m not going to leave my ailing wife and that I promised to stay by her side for the rest of her life. But you have to leave Hugo and learn how to be alone.

I became filled with rage. What right did he have to say that to me, he who would never ever be alone? We were in a hotel room in the mountains. I got dressed and left him stunned, his mouth hanging open.

Leaving Hugo? Sure it was possible. I earned a good living and now I was in good enough health to become financially secure in a few years. The children would end up accepting it, as they had my profession.

But I couldn’t. I didn’t have the strength to leave Hugo at this stage. After everything we had, after so much time. I would only leave him to marry Fernando and Fernando didn’t want to. “It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s because I can’t,” he had said.

Deep down I thought all men were the same. They were all intolerably egotistical in their own way.

I went into the house stamping my feet loudly, determined to end it with my lover.

Hugo was waiting for me with a strange look on his face. He was fuming as he waved some photographs in his hand. “You whore,” he said slowly, quietly, “the most shameless whore in the whole country, let’s see what this is?” And he threw the pictures in my face. They fell to the floor.

I calmly picked them up and looked at them. They showed Fernando and me, naked, in a river. At that moment the beautiful memory made my throat feel as if it were tied in a knot. Everything had been delightful that day in the river at the volcano. Fernando had taught me things that, at another time and with another person would have seemed inappropriate to me. He taught me to feel things so intensely, so differently using parts of the body that were generally considered vulgarly unnatural. And I had discovered that all parts of the body could feel sensation-that the body, all of it, all of its orifices, had been created to be stimulated. I often became weakened discovering everything Fernando referred to as “border lines” and with only approaching these limits, exploring these mucous membranes, ecstasy could be attained. That day I had told him, under the sun, with complete sincerity: “A woman doesn’t have to be Miss Universe to be happy; she doesn’t even have to be that pretty. I believe that I now know, Fernando, that what two free, consensual adults do voluntarily, between themselves couldn’t be bad. There is no sin for two consensual adults. Sinning is

when one forces the other, or when the strong dominates the weak.” And Fernando laughed after hearing my interpretation of sin: “You’re never going to liberate yourself from that religious education Diana.” he had said.

And so that day they were following me to that spot under the sun and in the water. Hugo had sent detectives to take pictures. They had had the patience to drive for three hours to the volcano to find the warm river in which Fernando loved to submerge me. The surroundings that loving day between us were so astoundingly colorful; the ambiance magnified the indiscretion decisively. And the detectives had not only seen it, they had also photographed it.

The memory was seized by the blow from Hugo. “What do you have to say about that, whore?” he shouted after hitting me. After that he fell apart: “I don’t understand, I don’t understand why you destroyed me, you always told me that we were a happy family.” After that he changed his tone and gave further details, shouting, about how he had all the proof concerning my adultery and that he had asked for a divorce and the custody of the children. He also explained that I earned a good living and, for that reason, he would refuse to give me alimony. And that I, myself, had transferred the house, car and banking account in his name.

“I didn’t do that,” I told him fearfully.

“Yes, you did. Look, here’s your signature.”

Then I remembered, like another blow to the stomach, the day, several weeks ago, that Hugo had asked for my signatures. I had spent the afternoon with Fernando and it was as if I was in a cloud. I also felt very guilty. In other words, I

was in such a good mood that afternoon that I was easily compelled to give Hugo anything that he asked for. Casually he had asked me for three signatures to modify our joint account. And yes, I signed without looking. Now Hugo was telling me that the signatures were really for the bank account, the house and the car. I knew he was right. He had everything.

As Hugo got ready to hit me again, I ran away. I didn't want to confront the children, I didn't want to see anyone, I only wanted to run.

I got tired of running and called Fernando. I told him everything. He immediately gave me the telephone number of an attorney that specialized in domestic abuse. I called her and explained the whole situation from the beginning and she made an appointment to see me first thing the next day. I called Fernando back. I felt horrible, I asked him to sleep with me. He told me that he couldn't, that his wife was very sick that night.

I hated him.

I thought about sleeping at my parents' house but Hugo had surely already told my mother everything and she would be furious. For her, marriage was a perfectly sacred institution, violent or peaceful, cheerful or cheerless, compatible or conflicting,

What bothered me most was that Hugo would surely take all those pictures to the press. Then what could I do? Claim that they were a photomontage? But since they were genuine, there would not be any expert that would deny their authenticity. What to do? What really terrified me was the prospect of losing my job. Because then there would be nothing left to lift me up, to help me survive.

I went to sleep at a hotel and from the hotel I called the lawyer again. She told me that Fernando had just called her with the same fear, and that yes, Hugo could take advantage of my popularity to completely ruin me and at the same time ruin Fernando. Yes, he could give them the pictures. And he may have already done it. Yes, adultery was the legal term. And then she asked me: “Diana, we have the whole patriarchal society against us, but we can fight and win the battle. Your expressive account of never having experienced pleasure is the story of eighty percent of the women polled through opinion surveys. Yours is a difficult case, but it’s not impossible. Are you prepared to fight?”

“Well, I don’t have any other option. If I don’t fight, I’ll be finished.”

“That’s right.”

I hung up the phone. I called Fernando back to thank him. “Thanks for what?”

“For everything, I’m not going to see you anymore. I want to be courageous and confront this situation by myself, to confront my whole life by myself.”

“But you know that I will always be by your side for whatever you need.”

“I’d rather not see you.”

I hung up and I slept.

The Sniper

A Translation of Eduardo Callejas'
El francotirador

Honduras

Antonio Orellana's distinction as the rural auditor of the Ministry of Revenue was already well-known in Puerto Cortés before he packed his bags to travel there. The rumors concerning his unbeatable record of conquests over women and the shrewd manner in which he eluded accountability went around the customs offices; the gossip utterly infiltrated the various agencies also associated with customs: it frustrated the jealous sentries of the National Port Authority, spread itself through the administration offices, the warehouses, the container terminals, and the restricted free zone, only to return always, to its point of origin understated, diluted, and revised.

It was said that in La Cieba, Antonio Orellana had evaded being lynched by the host of admirers of Rumigilda I, the queen of the carnival, and escaped through Golosón disguised as a clown. And that from Amatillo he crossed the border into El Salvador running from the rage of a border guard whose wife he had pinched on the backside. That he had left Roatán hidden in the ice hold of a shrimp boat, pursued by the brothers of an island girl that he had impregnated. That in el Poy... That in Tela... That in San Lorenzo.

And it's not that Antonio was an attractive man. He was actually a chubby man with dark skin; but when smiling he displayed unblemished teeth framed

with a full moustache and a carefully trimmed beard that, combined with his easy manner of speech and clear voice, gave women the impression of some sort of underdeveloped James Bond.

The arrival of the auditor in Puerto Cortés coincided with the celebration of the August festival. Wandering through the neighborhood mini-fairs, his ravenous eyesight couldn't obtain a fix or establish a target among the enormous flow of possibilities. He became feverishly bewitched by the movements of the women with skin the color of cinnamon and the sway of their waists dancing at the front of the barrio Buenos Aires; with the flirting laughs of the salsa girls in Campo Rojo; with the fiery mestizas of El Porvenir dancing in time to suggestive boleros.

The day he reported for work Olga Salgado was waiting for him. She was assigned by the administration as his link to the offices that needed to be reviewed. The firm fleshed girl with a lively gait shook Antonio Orellana's entire nervous system like an earthquake of 9.7 degrees on the Richter scale

Decisively making Olga his target, he set out to pursue her relentlessly like the shadow to the night. He knew from the beginning that she was from Tegucigalpa where she frequently went to visit her mother and small son; that her husband was a wetback in California; that he had just gotten a job two months ago.

Despite her experience, Olga became indispensable because of her practical resourcefulness.

“Is it OK like this?” she asked Antonio one morning, presenting him with the report that he had asked her for the day before.

Antonio took the report, but his wandering eyes hidden behind his black spectacles settled on the captivating curves of his assistant. She was wearing a dress of silk-like material that went down from her shoulders simultaneously sliding provocatively over her firm bust while following the soft curve of her hips, which also immediately delineated her glorious legs, caressing them, pampering them; outlining all of it.

Olga turned to ask again, rescuing him from his obsessive daydream.

“Is it OK like this?”

“Yes, of course!” answered Antonio letting out a sigh.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Nibbling the report between his teeth he added, “But I do know what I’d do with you”.

After having implemented his complete combat arsenal of female conquest techniques, his initial attacks were frustrated by this impenetrable stronghold. Weakened by the scent of the desired woman, he then opted for retreat and a strategic regrouping in order to execute a surprise attack later. When he believed he was at the point of having the conquest close at hand, the girl would put more barriers between them, taking off for Tegucigalpa on the weekends.

“I’ve seen a woman looking just like her out and about dancing provocatively with some guy in the capital,” a visiting supervisor in Puerto Cortés told him.

Antonio jumped to the defense of the girl remembering the frustrating rejections of which he had been the object.

“Olga is not one of those types; I know it because I’m telling you.”

“Fine”, said the supervisor hoping to excuse himself. “They say everyone has a twin somewhere in the world.”

Spurred by pride, the luckless lover changed his passionate line of attack, but not for an older, less effective tactical approach. It came to him while contemplating at the beaches of Coca Cola as the sun was setting and the moon was rising simultaneously over Alvarado’s lagoon. Eating fish under the arbors in front of the sea and drowning from the shout of “goal” from the spectators in Excelsior stadium, the thought of bringing her a nighttime serenade came to mind. But the thought was soon dismissed when a pack of mongrel dogs howling pitifully appeared as they followed some street musicians singing out of tune in counterinsurgent cacophony. He imagined Olga’s desk already covered with perfume, candy and flowers.

Finally one afternoon at the end of the work day, Olga affectionately succumbed to the desires of the ladies’ man. Having already received his next assignment in Toncontín, he responded desperately.

“I want you to be mine,” he said in an uncontrolled expression of emotion.

“Yes, tonight! But you have to use a condom,” she said, also expressing herself intimately for the first time.

The following days saw them reach the pinnacle of ecstasy as if they were flying over the clouds. Day after day Antonio discovered with amazement new qualities in Olga’s personality. He had never found in any of his previous romantic adventures a woman that made *el atol de elote* so well. At times, elevated to such high points of rapture, he had felt like a young lad penetrating an intricate sexual labyrinth.

The morning of his departure the satiated lovers were surprised to see that they had had their fill. Hours later, peacefully seated in the bus that was transporting him to his new destination, Antonio Orellana smiled maliciously: he had perforated the condoms before spending the last night with Olga.

“What an ingenious idea,” he thought contentedly, “in about nine months that beautiful babe will be remembering me for the rest of her life, like Inés, like Argentina, like all the rest.”

Five days later Antonio was very nervous waiting for his turn at a private clinic with a case of the clap that burned like hell.

One Hooker for Three

“Una puta para tres”
by
Salvador Canjura

El Salvador

They called her Celsa; she was dark-skinned, robust and flirtatious. She dressed in light colored tight pants and a leather jacket; she wore too much makeup. It had been ten years since I had seen her in San Jacinto, walking on the sidewalk under the pallid glow of the public street lights. My friends were much more familiar than I with the nightlife of San Salvador; they had found that bar on one of their many forays. The truth is, I wasn't familiar with much more than my house and the way to school; I was, and continue to be, a bookworm.

That afternoon Don José and his sons came to visit. My father was just returning from work as they all gathered in the living room. He and Don José met in high school, they were friends in shop. In time they began to visit bars and went out to party often. After finishing high school, Don José remained in contact with my family although he lived in Santa Ana with his parents. A few years later he came to live in San Salvador. Don José's two sons and I met at the reunions that our fathers organized annually at different resorts or some restaurant serving traditionally authentic meals. His sons and I were friends for just a few days each year; we had very distinct interests. They had always stood out in sports while I enjoyed immersing myself in the reading of history books. They were quite popular with the girls, they had hundreds of girlfriends; I was chubby, plagued with a serious case of acne and couldn't put two intelligent words together if I

found myself in front of a pretty girl. Our parents had hopes that their offspring would interchange some qualities. I think that was the purpose of the get together that afternoon in November; they arrived that day escorted by Tulio, a friend of don José who gave off the pretentious air of being experienced in life. I detested him; detested his earsplitting loud laughs that erupted at the most inopportune moments and the way he made fun of me for not yet having had sexual relations with a woman.

“You’re gonna have to get that thing busy!” he said sarcastically, pointing at my crotch. “If you don’t it’s gonna fall off!”

He was laughing like an idiot and I was dying to punch him in his buzzard-like nose. He wouldn’t let it go and continued bothering me until I walked away.

“Don’t go looking for another book, please!” he teased.

“You gotta see that won’t do you any good in life.”

That afternoon, my father retrieved my notebook and showed it to the visitors –I was finishing up my second year of secondary studies. Out of the eleven courses, I had earned an A on seven and a B on the other four final exams with a G.P.A. of 9.75. They all looked at the numbers as if they were part of the inscription of some gold trophy, while I wished that I could just disappear. I would have loved to burn that part of the notebook right in front of them. I would have done it without regret if I had had the opportunity.

I was surprised when they invited me to the cinema. They knew that I wasn’t a fan of the war movies that they preferred.

“Don’t worry,” said Marco, the youngest brother. “We’re going to see an adventure flick.”

“Yeah buddy, I think it’s based on one of the books you’ve read”, said Tulio.

I don’t know how they convinced me, but I changed clothes and when I returned to the living room my father gave me two 25 colón⁵ bills; more than enough for the picture show. We left the house and set off for Don José’s house in his car; there he got out of the car and gave the keys to Tulio.

“See you tomorrow,” he said with a smile. “Don’t come home too late.”

“Don’t wait up for us,” said Armando, his oldest son.

It was strange that Don José didn’t go along with us; he liked going to the movies. We drove to the Zona Zacamil; after passing many streets in the neighborhood we arrived at one that had many buildings.

“I have to stop at my house for a moment,” Tulio had said on the way, it’s my sister’s birthday.

Tulio turned off the car motor and opened the door to get out; I put my hand on his shoulder to get his attention.

“Bring the newspaper so we can see the scheduling of the movie theaters,” I said. Marco and Armando looked at each other, trying to hold back their laughter.

“It would be better if we went in with you,” said Marco, ignoring my request. “We’re not gonna stay here outside waiting for you.”

⁵ A unit of currency used in El Salvador and Costa Rica named after Cristobal Colón/ Christopher Columbus.

Tulio nodded. We went up the stairs to the second floor and entered the apartment. Tulio's sister was very pretty. She greeted us amiably and gave us each a piece of cake and a soft drink in a glass.

"Now I know why Tulio didn't want us to come up," said Armando. "He was afraid that we would mess around with his sister."

"It's that he already knows you guys are shameless," I joked. I was a bit uncomfortable, but I was able to loosen my tongue because the girl was so friendly.

While waiting for Tulio we turned on the TV. I opened the newspaper to the movie section. After that an idea occurred to me:

"Why don't we invite the girl to go with us?" I said. I was pleased with my unusual initiative. "It is her birthday, Right?"

Armando and Marco looked at each other again. As they laughed hysterically at my suggestion the pieces of cake in their hands were at the point of flying apart all over the floor.

"Yes, you are innocent," said Marco. You really believed all that about the cinema?"

"We're not really going?" I asked visibly frightened.

They began laughing again. Marco left the plate and glass of soda on a table and took hold of my arm with his big mitt.

"Let's not linger. We're going where the hookers are. Why do you think your dad gave you so much cash?"

“Yeah,” said Armando, with his mouth stuffed full of sweets, “today you’re going to become a man.”

I had been naïve. I didn’t realize that they had lured me out of the house. I was defenseless; at this point I wasn’t able to protest, I was stuck in the middle.

“I’m ready,” said Tulio; coming from his room. “We can go now.”

We said good bye to Tulio’s mother and sister. We went down to the parking lot and got into the car; Tulio drove.

He asked, “Did they already tell you where we’re going?”

“Yeah, he already knows. That’s why he’s dumbfounded with emotion.” Marco patted me on the back. “You’ll soon see, Neto, you’re gonna like this place.”

I couldn’t pronounce one word. I thought about thousands of things: the high school, two very pretty and inaccessible female friends from class. I remembered the face of Tulio’s sister, her cinnamon colored skin and thin arms. Everything was confusing; I rode in the back seat of the car headed toward some place that I had never imagined I would be.

“Let’s first go by Calle 16,”⁶ said Armando excitedly. “We can see the little whores sitting around out there.

He didn’t have to ask again; Tulio entered the Alameda⁷ Juan Pablo and a few minutes later he turned at the corner of Calle 16. It was about eight o’clock at night; however, there wasn’t anyone in the street. No clients, no women.

⁶ 16th Street

⁷ A tree lined avenue similar to a boulevard

“Check out all the chicks!” Tulio said facetiously while he continued to drive without stopping the car.

“I don’t see any? It seems that they’ve all gone on strike,” said Marco. It’s better we go right away to find Celsa.

Tulio drove toward Venezuela Boulevard and then turned in to the San Jacinto neighborhood. I wasn’t able to recognize any of the streets through which we traveled. Several years later I went to trace the route we followed that night. I even passed by the bar we were at.

“Look,” said Marco, as he stuck his arm out the window to point at a women walking down the sidewalk, “isn’t that Celsa?”

“I think so,” said Armando “Let’s talk to her. Celsa! Hey. Over here!”

The woman stopped and greeted Armando; she came up to the car.

“Hi! You all haven’t been around for awhile, have you? Go on in, I’m just getting here.”

Tulio parked the car and the brothers rushed to get out.

“Hurry up, Neto, don’t lag behind; remember we came here for you.”

Tulio smiled; everyone was smiling, except for me.

“I’m coming,” I said with a dry mouth. We went into a filthy bar. There was a red light bulb at the counter attended by a very old, thin woman. An old jukebox played a bolero; two men were drinking beer at a table located at the other end of the narrow hall, singing and complaining about the ungrateful aspects of women.

“Let’s sit here,” said Celsa pointing to a table next to a wall covered with portraits of naked women. The lighting was inadequate. Another red light bulb that hung from the ceiling right above us gave our skin a grotesque appearance.

We sat at the table and Marco asked for a round of beers. He requested a soft drink for me to make fun because I still wasn’t drinking alcohol, like men.

“Today you’re gonna have to pound one. That’s a bunch of shit that you don’t even drink beer.”

“Calm down,” said Tulio in a conciliatory tone, very strange for him. “If he wants one he’ll drink one, don’t force it on him.”

“The next thing we’re gonna ask for you is gonna be a beer”, warned Armando. “If you don’t have one you’ll go home on foot!” he laughed and hugged Celsa, while he whispered something in her ear. She looked me in the face and smiled; said something to Armando, got up and left.

“Look Marco,” said Tulio, “for now just you two go ahead.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going fag?” said Marco, contemptuously. He took a long drink from the bottle and looked at the two women that were walking in to the establishment and approaching the two men still singing boleros.

“No, it’s that I came yesterday; I went with Linda. Really, today I just don’t have the desire to go in.”

“Whatever,” said Marco. He took a wad of bills out of his pants and counted them. “If it’s a cash problem I can lend you some.”

The jukebox played the same bolero over again. The place was almost empty; I could hear the voices of the men that were drinking with the two women

that just came in. I heard a glass break and a “shit”, spoken in a hostile, unwelcome manner. A waitress cleaned up the mess and got rid of the broken glass. The one that broke the glass pinched her on the rear as she was walking away.

“Let’s go over by Celsa,” said Armando, with vulgar eyes. “She’s the best; the others aren’t worth the trouble.”

“She’ll treat you well,” Marco told me; “the beer has already affected her, she was slurring her words; you’re gonna go first.”

“Well say something, chump! Are you deaf?” said Armando. And it was the truth; I could only listen to what they stipulated and couldn’t utter a word.

“What do you want me to say?” I mumbled. I was very nervous.

“Not a damn thing!” Armando got angry; I thought he was going to hit me. “I can see there really is something wrong with you.”

Celsa came back with an empty bottle and placed it down in the center of the table; she sat down next to Armando again.

“Now we’re gonna play,” said Celsa, while putting her hand over the bottle and making it spin. “The person the bottle points to when it stops spinning will be the first to go back with me.”

We watched the revolutions of the bottle anxiously; listening to the friction of the glass against the wood. It began to spin slower and slower until it remained motionless with the opening of the bottle selecting Marco.

“Oh well,” said Celsa, and she began to spin the bottle again, “Since it wasn’t clear who was chosen let’s try it again.”

It was obvious that the game would not be finished until I was the one chosen. In effect, that's what happened. Celsa determined the result of the bottle many times, at times with a hard spin and others more slowly, always arguing that the outcome was not very clear. She manipulated the fate until the neck of the bottle pointed toward my body. She smiled and looked Marco in the eyes. I remained immobile, observing the table.

"Go ahead Neto, you get to go first, said Armando, patting me on the back. "Don't wear her out, leave something for us."

"Please!" I said. It was hard for me to conceal the shaking that seized me.

"What's wrong with you? Aren't you pleased?" asked Tulio. It was strange, it wasn't bothering me quite as much as before, considering that Marco and Armando had begun to ease up a bit.

"Loan me the car keys," I told Tulio, straining to maintain my composure. I held my hand out toward him.

He hesitated undecidedly for a moment and then went back gazing at everyone else; I didn't move my eyes from his face. I didn't think he was going to give them to me. To my relief he stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled them out.

"Here," he said. He knew I couldn't drive, so there wasn't any possibility for me to take off, "We'll be there in a few minutes to go somewhere else."

I took the keys and got up from the table without offering one more word; I went out to the street, walked toward the car and opened the front passenger door. I thought about putting the keys in the ignition to turn on the radio. Instead I waited in silence, pondering over my father's betrayal –that's how I calculated it--

, and how “my friends” exaggerated about having relations with six or seven women every week. I must have been thinking deeply for a long time, until the knocking on the window brought me back to reality. Tulio wanted me to open the door on the driver’s side; I unlocked it and he got in the car. He sat next to me.

“Are you nervous,” he asked.

“What do you think,” I said. My chin was trembling, just like my lips.

“I told your dad that you weren’t going to like being lured. It would have been better if you had known where we were going; this wasn’t a good idea. But, why are you crying? Since nothing really happened, there’s nothing really to squeal about!”

I wasn’t interested in his opinions; as I listened to him my crying intensified. I let the tears run down my face; I didn’t attempt to wipe them with my hands.

“Don’t let them see you cry, they’re going to humiliate you to no end if they see you, they’re gonna....”

He stopped talking. He must have understood that he was only making me more nervous; he waited for a few seconds, while I continued crying, regretting my imperfections. I asked myself why I couldn’t be like the others, like Marco or Armando, who drank and lay with women when they had the slightest urge. I gritted my teeth and asked myself why I had to be so timid, so cowardly.

“I’m going to take you home,” said Tulio; he started the car and released the handbrake. “Calm down, or they’re gonna know that you were crying.”

The following day my father would find fifty *colóns* on his night table. He would ask me why I didn't spend them. I would respond with all the integrity possible:

"I didn't need them; that's why I gave them back to you."

I would never know if he understood what I wanted to say to him, we never spoke about it again. I believe that from that day on we gradually became more and more distant, until after some time, I moved out of his house and left the country for many years never to see him again.

And while Tulio drove back to my house, I rode by his side in absolute silence. I had my legs up on the seat, and my knees were raised up to my neck. I had my arms wrapped around my ankles. My mouth was kissing my thighs as I tried to remember a distant song that spoke of what a boy would do when he grew up and became a man.

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